Interview with Rob Podlasek

EH-A-L-2021-010

Interview # 1: April 15, 2021

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Thursday, April 15, 2021. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. We are in the presidential library today with Dr. Robert Podlasek. How are you today, Bob?

Podlasek: Oh, I'm feeling great. It's a perfect day outside, perfect to be here.

DePue: Your interview is going to be part of our Education is Key Higher Education collection, and we have a handful of people we've already interviewed about that. But I'm excited about this interview especially because you essentially have spent your entire adult life in some way connected to the university, so we're going to hear about your early days at the University of Illinois and the early 1960s, then going to graduate school through the mid to late 1960s up to 1972 when a lot was changing at the university.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: Then a little hiatus away from the university and pick up and take a pretty detailed snapshot of what university was like when you began at Bradley University in '82, and then we'll finish up with a long discussion about where the universities and colleges are at today and how we got from what it was like in the early 1980s to that. So that's a pretty long introduction, but that's why my purpose is here.

Podlasek: It's a great outline.

DePue: Okay, and I warned you already, I always start with getting plenty of background, so when and where were you born, Bob?

Podlasek: I was born in Chicago, 1942, August fifth.

DePue: And what neighborhood did you grow up in?

Podlasek: I great up in the Bridgeport neighborhood, which, of course, was the Daley political machine neighborhood. Daley was an active participant in our church. He didn't belong to our church. He belonged to another. But everybody worked together in the neighborhood, and the culture was sort of interesting because you live that culture, and that's the important thing, I think.

DePue: Podlasek, am I saying the name correctly?

Podlasek: Sure, you are.

DePue: And it's S-E-K, right?

Podlasek: S-E-K.

DePue: And what would be the nationality of the Podlaseks?

Podlasek: Well, the Podlaseks are from southern Poland, and so that would be part Czechoslovakian. And the name Podlasek is in both in Czech and in Polish.

DePue: But wouldn't that be the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia, or am I wrong there?

Podlasek: Right, right, right.

DePue: So are they still speaking—in the old county, they would speak Czech in Slovakia?

Podlasek: I think so. I never tracked that too deeply. My parents went back to Poland and checked things out, but I never did, so you know.

DePue: Were your parents—had been in the country for a couple generations?

Podlasek: They were one generation they were born, they were second generation people. And in a sense, I was third generation, first to go to college kind of thing.

DePue: Do you know how the family ended up in Chicago, south side of Chicago?

Podlasek: Yeah, it's just friends and relatives. My father started off in New York City, but by six years old he was living in Bridgeport, and my mother, her mother and all her brothers and sisters all lived in Bridgeport. And so they all ended up in the city except for one fella moved to San Francisco, but my maternal grandfather had about six brothers and sisters, and they all were in some sort of business or something in the Bridgeport area of Chicago.

DePue: Was that your paternal grandparents?

Podlasek: My paternal grandfather worked at a brewery, which was prevalent in those days.

DePue: Tell me a little bit more about your father. Let's start with your dad's name.

Podlasek: My father's name is Joseph Podlasek. And I think he finished about tenth grade or something like that, and he worked as numerous things, but he ended up working as a tool and die and jig and fixture maker for General Motors' Electromotive Division in La Grange, Illinois. They made diesel locomotives, and he was building the frames and things like that.

DePue: You were born in 1942. Was your dad a veteran?

Podlasek: He was not. He had a critical skills, in a sense, deferment because he was making diesel locomotives.

DePue: Yeah, there would have been a huge demand for that at war time.

Podlasek: There was, and it was critical, was a critical skill. It ended up, my father-in-law was working in the same plant. Didn't know each other, but it's a big, big operation.

DePue: How would you describe your dad's personality?

Podlasek: Huge work ethic, always wanting the best for everyone, willing to make sacrifices, always tried to better himself, but he was hampered by lack of education. So all the algebra, trigonometry that he needed for his job he had to self-teach himself. But he was an excellent mechanic and that sort of thing.

DePue: But dropping out after the tenth grade when he was coming of age was not unusual at all, was it?

Podlasek: Correct. And so he went into schools in Bridgeport, public school. That sort of worked out pretty well. His mother died when he was young, I think fifteen.

DePue: And how about your mother? What was her name?

Podlasek: Her name was Sofia Rutkowski, R-U-T-K-O-W-S-K-I.

DePue: That sounds a little bit more Polish?

Podlasek: That's more central Poland. And her whole family, brothers and sisters and everybody, moved to Bridgeport, probably 1900 or something earlier than that.

DePue: Well, they were getting out of Poland in the right time then, before World War I.

Podlasek: Right, right, before World War I.

DePue: Do you know—sorry to interrupt.

Podlasek: Sure.

DePue: But would they have been in the Germany part of Poland or the Russia part of Poland when they emigrated?

Podlasek: I believe the Russian part, but all of the folks in Bridgeport were so happy to be in the United States. There was not the kind of, "I wish I was back in Poland," or, "Boy, I wish I could go back." (laughter) They were happy, and they put that out of their mind. They wanted to immigrate and to assimilate into the United States as fast as they could and be Americans right away.

DePue: And you're a generation or two removed from that, was Polish spoken at all in the family?

Podlasek: It was spoken, however, I never learned it. It never was an issue. Only when my parents didn't want my brother and I to know what they were talking about would they speak in Polish. But basically they didn't, but in the church there was a group of people who spoke Polish, but again, it didn't matter to me at all.

DePue: Yeah, you mentioned that Richard J. Daley was in the neighborhood and came to the church, but I'm guessing that Daley went to a church where there was primarily Irish Catholics.

Podlasek: Right, Nativity or something like that, but there were churches very close to each other. One was German. One was Irish. One was Polish. One was Lithuanian. So there was a lot of churches in Bridgeport. And massive churches, well-funded, big, lots of priests, and lots of processions and all that sort of stuff.

DePue: Did your mother work outside the home?

Podlasek: She worked a little bit as a waitress from time to time. And then basically, we lived in a small, tiny apartment, which was a walk-up place (2531 S. Throop). It didn't have hot water, and it didn't have a bathroom, but that's where we

lived. We had stove heat. Then in 1955 we ultimately moved out to Willow Springs and bought a house.

DePue: Well, we're going to get to Willow Springs chapter here in a little bit. Didn't have a bathroom.

Podlasek: Right, we shared a bathroom with someone else.

DePue: An indoor bathroom?

Podlasek: Indoor bathroom, but it had just a stool, one stool. We shared that.

DePue: How about a bathtub or a shower?

Podlasek: Negative. We didn't have that. So we would go to the park, which is McKinley Park, and shower, or we would go to my grandmother's house and shower. Or not shower, just take a bath, as a little kid.

DePue: How many siblings?

Podlasek: I have one brother, younger- year and a half younger.

DePue: And how would you describe your mom's personality?

Podlasek: She was the classic housewife. She took care of everything, all the food, all of the cleaning, and then she worked part-time. And so she would work downtown for lunches, and then we would leave grade school, St. Barbara, for lunch and go to my great aunt's house, who was my grandmother's sister, and we would eat over there.

DePue: I know you've got an engineering background. You've spent your career teaching engineering, mechanical things like that. Does that mean you take after your dad more than your mother?

Podlasek: Oh yeah, for sure. My father was always redoing things, building things and everything, so that's where I picked that up.

DePue: You mentioned he'd only finished tenth grade, and that was something of an impediment, to be able to advance. Was that something that bothered him, that he didn't have more schooling?

Podlasek: A little bit, but they're just happy to be in the United States, happy to have a paycheck. And I remember it was forty-five dollars or fifty-five dollars a week was the paycheck. We were just so happy to have that and have food on the table. Tt just wasn't the kind of negative thing that you would have now. Now, my father lived to ninety-eight, and despite working in a ugly environment, dirty and everything else, but he was always an optimist and always happy all the time. And he never thought he was a victim of anything.

He just said today's the day, and I'm going to make the best of it and go on to the next day.

DePue: Well, we can already hear some hints of what we're going to end the conversation with, and it won't be in this session, I don't think. Tell me more. You've already started to describe Bridgeport as a neighborhood, and I confess I looked at the Google map today, and I went to the view so you can see what it's actually like, a lot of small houses with small yards.

Podlasek: Oh yeah.

DePue: What was the neighborhood like for you?

Podlasek: It was exactly that, small homes, usually two-story. We lived up on the second floor where there were two apartments, and the first floor it was the owner of the building which had a tavern originally down below. And the next-door house was brick, and it had two stories, and the lady worked for the city for the police department, and then the next store was an ex-tavern. And the fella who's my age who lived there, he became a police officer, and now his kids are police officers, and then the next house was his relatives, so you know, these people would all sort of get together, and they still owned a house. They still live there. They now own the block, just about, in Bridgeport. And the third house or fourth house down is where my father lived when he moved from New York. And so it's a close-knit community, and everybody knew each other, everybody trusted each other, and, you know, there were a few contrarians. Everybody, seemed to me, got along except if they voted the wrong way. So they all know how to vote.

DePue: Voting the wrong way, what did that mean when you were growing up?

Podlasek: That meant that, if you wanted good things to happen, you would vote the right way. And if you didn't, all sorts of bad things would happen to your house, to your street. Plus, if you wanted something, you had to go to the tavern and talk to the precinct committeeman who would take care of it for you.

DePue: I'm guessing that voting the right way was voting Democrat.

Podlasek: Right. And that was just embedded in the system. So my brother, who was in the sixth grade, had to give a speech before a bunch of people for the twenty-fifth anniversary for one of the priests at the church. So the priest was sitting in the middle right in front, and right next to him was Richard J. Daley, the 11th Ward Alderman. And when my brother was finished with the speech, he had to go down and give the priest some flowers. And next to the priest was Richard J. Daley, so he shook priest's hand. Then he shook Daley's hand, and Daley said, "When you get to be voting age, son, don't forget to vote for me." (laughter) So he was always hustling a vote, always hustling.

DePue: Daley became mayor in 1955, and if my math is right, you guys had already moved out of the neighborhood. Was he alderman then, or was he down—

Podlasek: He was the alderman there, and then he was also the city clerk.

DePue: Well, I know he was picked down in the legislature for a while as well.

Podlasek: Right, before that he was a senator, so he was active politically. It was later in his political career that he became mayor because he had all these other things. But he was there always hustling. And people knew that your precinct committeemen would take care of you when you needed snowplow or you needed a tree preserved or taken out or whatever you needed.

DePue: Did your parents resent that, or did they take that for granted and use that to their advantage?

Podlasek: As it worked out, we all believed in benevolent dictators, so that's the way it is, you know. So long as they take care of us, we take care of them. No controversy.

DePue: When we first met you told a story about, I think it was your mother getting her permit, her driver's permit. Tell me that story.

Podlasek: Well, you know, you basically live in a city, all cramped in, and my mother had a need for her to get a driver's license because we were thinking about moving out into the suburbs, and she needed a drivers' license. So she would go down to the Soldier Field parking lot which was not far away. Sunday mornings she would drive around and practice, and once she got good enough with the clutch and driving the car and everything, my father thought, "Well, it's time for her to get on the street. I'll get her a permit." He went to the bar where he knew Tony was going to be there. Tony knew him from grade school or something.

DePue: Tony—? Who's Tony?

Podlasek: Tony worked for the secretary of state.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: So my father bought a round of beer for everybody, and he went to Tony. He said, "Hey, my wife's ready to drive, and she needs a permit." He says, "Give me the information, come back in two weeks." So my father comes back in two weeks, gets a driver's license. And my father said, "Well, I only asked for a permit." Tony said, "I didn't want to mess with you." So he gave my mother the driver's license. That's how she got it. When I took my driver's test at 15, Tony was my guy that took care of me. And my father was in the backseat.

DePue: Was there ever any money exchanged or just the—

Podlasek: Yeah, sure.

DePue: To Tony?

Podlasek: Yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: But Tony refused it, and then my father flipped it back. Then Tony flipped it back again. And Tony didn't want money, but my father was always offering, and my brother remembers all these stories about if you get pulled over by the police, you know, wrap your driver's license in a five or a ten and hand it to the police officer kind of thing. So as of yesterday or the day before, my brother reminded me of those stories. But that's just the way it worked, and nobody took issue with it. It's a fringe benefit for being a police officer. And so what's the big deal?

DePue: You said your parents were voting Democrat all this time?

Podlasek: Right. And all of these people just were happy as can be. They loved America. And that was it. There was no desire to change the system or anything.

DePue: Now, you already talked about going to the Catholic Church, how religious would you say your family was?

Podlasek: At that stage, we were really active at St. Barbara's Church on Throop Street in Chicago. And my father was one of the ushers. For one mass or something he was in charge of the ushers, where they collected the money and that sort of thing, and my brother and I were altar boys for every event that was going on. So we went to funerals, weddings, baptisms. I always took the early morning masses to be an altar boy, and learned my Latin and went along with the crew.

DePue: Well, tell a good Lutheran what an altar boy does.

Podlasek: An altar boy, depending on the church, sometimes there's two altar boys. But we used to have six or eight altar boys. So there'd be, based on height, we'd be next to the priest, and he would say a prayer, and then we'd have a response in Latin. And he would go through a whole set of prayers, and there'd be a Latin response for everything, and then the next part of the mass there was the offering where the wine and water was brought to the altar. The altar boys did that. Later on there was the communion where the altar boy held the paten as the priest distributed the communion to everybody. But there was always, like, a little parade, a little bit where you'd walk in and walk out, that sort of thing.

DePue: While you were living in the Bridgeport neighborhood, you went to grade school, I would think, into junior high years. Were you going to public or Catholic school?

Podlasek: I went to the Catholic school, St. Barbara's school, so that fed into being an altar boy. So I left at the seventh grade.

DePue: Well, one more question about growing up in Bridgeport. I'm assuming the family were White Sox fans.

Podlasek: Generally, yeah, right, we didn't really know that the Cubs were there. We lived within walking distance of Comiskey Park.

DePue: Comiskey.

Podlasek: And one time I did go to a game with a friend and my brother, two friends, I guess. And the game lasted until, like, 11:30 PM or 12:00 AM, and then we ended walking home at night, and my parents were extremely angry because first, they were wondering where we were at, and they didn't know that the game lasted that long because they don't listen to it on the radio or anything.

DePue: Did they not know you were going to the game?

Podlasek: Oh, they knew we were going to the game, they just didn't know it lasted as long. But in the walk, we would walk through neighborhoods which, you know, you had to belong, and if you didn't belong to that neighborhood, people recognized that right away. And that tradition of beating people up when you didn't belong in the neighborhood was always there, you know.

DePue: So gangs but not in gangs in the sense we have them today?

Podlasek: Right, right, they were just, this is our territory and that sort of thing.

DePue: Was there any Black neighborhoods when you were growing up?

Podlasek: There were some scattered around, but they were mostly white. And we lived just west of Chinatown because Chinese people have now moved into Bridgeport, where we lived.

DePue: When you were growing up, were there little enclaves? This is the Irish part of Bridgeport, the Czech, the—

Podlasek: Oh yeah. Yeah, and they were around the church, if it was a Irish church, most of the people. Now, there was some Polish people went to the Irish church, like my uncle and aunt, but, you know, that sort of thing. The other thing they did was bingo all the time to raise money.

DePue: At the churches?

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah. So it was just a close-knit group, and everybody seemed to get along, as far as I knew. But I knew that there was territory where you didn't want to go, and if you moved into a new area on your bicycle, you had to really be careful.

DePue: But the Bridgeport you're describing sounds rather idyllic.

Podlasek: It was. And you know, there's quite a few people say I wish we had the old days. You know, we didn't have much, but it was fine. Certainly, I mean, we didn't have a shower or bathtub or anything, but you know, it was fine. Didn't have central heat or air conditioning or anything like that. But you know, you just adjusted, and it was all right.

DePue: You have any really special memories about growing up in that neighborhood that you can share?

Podlasek: Nothing—probably the memory I think about, is twice a year the priest would go and visit all the parishioners. So the pastor and the three assistants would go divide up the territory and visit and then ask for a donation. And part of that was an altar boy who had to walk 15 min. ahead and wrap on the door and say, "Father Joe's coming, be ready," kind of thing to forewarn the people that the priest was coming, and you'd have to find all these little apartments and doors and little places where people lived. Some people were excited to have the priest come and bless their apartment. And some people were not. And so I got to deal with all the people that were part of the parish as a little kid, and it was a way to get out of school too, so that was always a good thing. But I covered the whole neighborhood over three or four years, being the altar boy that was walking ahead. So you got to meet a lot of people and mingle with people a lot.

DePue: How old were you at that time?

Podlasek: Well, I would be in probably fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, seventh grade maybe. But that was a typical kind of thing that went on. And the priest would come with his holy water and bless the apartment. And the woman would kneel down, and that was it. Now, I think that was an old-world thing. I just, I never thought about it, but as I think about it now, I think—

DePue: Well, I can envision wide-eyed little Bob watching all this going on.

Podlasek: Yeah. And sometimes I was wrapping on the door ahead of time. Sometimes there would be one altar boy that would stay with the priest. And so we'd flip back and forth. So both ways it was a lot of fun. I didn't go to school. (laughter)

DePue: Tell me about what led to the move of the family off to Willow Springs.

Podlasek: Well, my parents were interested in bettering things and improving our living conditions. My mother worked, and we saved money, and my father worked for electromotive division in General Motors, which was in La Grange, so we found a place that was sort of close to La Grange and also on the bus route so we could go back to Bridgeport for all the family get-togethers and all the rest of the things. And Willow Springs sort of fit that bill. And so we went there, lived there, bought a house. We had apartment above that we used for income and subsidized things, and it worked out pretty well.

DePue: By looking at the map, it kind of saddles the canal.

Podlasek: It does, yeah. So we just moved along the canal, so to speak. But yeah, Willow Springs, on the old part of town, is on the south side of the canal and on the newer part is on the north side of it. And it borders Burr Ridge in one area. We lived up on a hill, because my parents didn't want to have a house where it would flood, so we picked a house that was pretty close to the top of the hill. And in then the forest preserve was right there. There's ten thousand acres of Cook County forest preserve a block away from our house.

DePue: Were you on the south side, the, of the canal?

Podlasek: Yeah. Roughly because that canal runs southwest.

DePue: Right.

Podlasek: The only bad part was that the high school was Argo High School district, so my parents decided I'd have to go to Joliet Catholic to high school.

DePue: You moved, it sounds like, in 1954. Does that sound right?

Podlasek: Fifty-five.

DePue: Fifty-five. Was your old neighborhood changing demographically?

Podlasek: Not for the first five, ten years that I could tell. It was not a neighborhood where there was in-migration of other groups, other ethnic groups and everything. And the fact is, I've gone back over the years to family reunions and stuff in that neighborhood, and it's still the same. And they've sort of stuck together. Those families that are there that have grown have bought the block and that sort of thing. There's a series of new houses, brick houses, but I think the only group that's moved in is the Asian group of Chinatown.

DePue: As neighborhoods go in Chicago, and I think this has a lot to do with the Daley's being from there, but it probably has as solid a reputation as any neighborhood in Chicago.

Podlasek: Well, it's not very wealthy. You know, poor people or low income. But culturally it's very cohesive because of the Daleys. And it seemed that it

stayed together, that people, you know, the Hispanics have moved in a little bit and stuff like that, like Pilsen, which is to the north, but Bridgeport stayed—now, I can't tell you in the last ten years or fifteen years, but most of those areas have moved to Hispanic in the last ten or fifteen years, but basically it's stayed pretty cohesive, and the people who moved out came back for the family get-togethers. So they left, but they really didn't leave. And so that added stability to it all.

DePue: The Willow Springs area, very close to both I-294 and I-55. Where they in existence? Had that construction already begun by the time you move there?

Podlasek: No. We would drive down Archer all the time. You're right, Interstate 55 came right through the area where I lived. So it came right down along the river. And it's two blocks from the house on Troop Street where I lived. And it took out the fire station and a bunch of other buildings. We would go from my house and walk under the bridge to the church.

DePue: On the other side of I55?

Podlasek: It's now on the other side of I55, but there's bridges and stuff, so it's not a big deal.

DePue: How disruptive was the construction of those interstates to the neighborhoods you were growing up in?

Podlasek: It just took out a lot of buildings, period, where my grandmother lived, the grocery store my grandmother owned, a whole bunch of things. But you know, people went along with it. Not a big deal, but as you drive down on 55, right at Throop Street is where I lived. And right adjacent to it is all the railroad tracks that were feeding into the Union Station. So if you take the train from Springfield to Union Station, you'll ride right past where I used to live.

DePue: So with the railroads, the canal, the interstates, everything to do with transportation and what Illinois is known for, but I'm guessing it was very much a working-class neighborhood you were still in.

Podlasek: Right, right. But there are these little neighborhoods around the Loop of Chicago that pretty much stayed the same. You know, there was the Italian people over on Taylor Street, and farther north there's another Polish area, you know, around the Loop. They're all walking distance to the Loop.

DePue: When you say the Loop, you're meaning the—

Podlasek: Chicago Loop, yeah.

DePue: The Subway?

Podlasek: State and Madison.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: You know, it was walking distance to State and Madison.

DePue: Which would be connection to bus lines?

Podlasek: Yeah, generally you would take a bus or a street car originally down to State and Madison and go to all the stores that were there and stuff like that, if you wanted to shop, but we didn't. We did it but not very often. And then you had all the parks along the lake where you could go.

DePue: What kind of car was your dad driving?

Podlasek: Well, he worked on cars a lot, but he had a Packard. But we ended up buying a Chevy because he worked for General Motors.

DePue: That would have been my guess.

Podlasek: And then I inherited that. When I was fifteen, I inherited the car because Tony helped me get a driver's license when I was fifteen.

DePue: Tony again.

Podlasek: Yeah.

DePue: Tony's an important guy.

Podlasek: He was. He made things happen. (laughs)

DePue: You said you went to Joliet Catholic high school. I'm guessing that's quite a stretch from where you were living?

Podlasek: Right, but it was on the bus line. There was a Blue Bird Bus line. And then eventually I got a car, so I would drive back and forth.

DePue: So the bus line was pretty straight shot to school?

Podlasek: Yeah, it was as Blue Bird Bus, as it was called.

DePue: By that time, did you graduate in '62 then?

Podlasek: Sixty, 1960 I graduated and went to the University of Illinois.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: So once I got to Willow Springs, age twelve, I guess, first thing I did was ride my bike around. And I ran into this guy who was hitchhiking. And I said,

"Where you going?" He says, "Oh, I'm hitchhiking to this golf course. I'm going to caddy there." So he showed me, gave me a tip on hitchhiking, and then I would walk to a place and start hitchhiking at twelve. And then I started caddying. And I started making a lot of money. So right away I had money in my pocket, and so that started a whole phase of my life which ended up with Evans Scholarship to go to the University of Illinois, and they paid for my room and tuition, and I worked for my meals. So I was able to go to college free of charge, basically.

DePue: Growing up, was there an assumption for your parents that you and your brother were always going to be going to college?

Podlasek: Absolutely not. There was no sense or pressure or anything to go to college. It just happened that I qualified. I had my grades from high school and everything, and the caddy master Fred said, you know, "You could qualify for this scholarship if you want." I said, "College, I don't know. All right, I'll fill it out." And I put down Northwestern, Wisconsin, and Illinois as my three choices to go to college. Finally I went through a couple of interviews, and I ended up with a scholarship to Illinois.

DePue: I'm guessing that this job as a caddy, you're meeting a different kind of person—

Podlasek: Oh, sure.

DePue: —than your dad and his people that you would be associating with.

Podlasek: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. And that was really influential all the way, for both my brother and myself. And I still connect with all those ex-caddies I went to college with. In fact, just today we've been emailing, so my roommate in 1960—the Evans Scholarship program has their own house to live at 206 East Green. So the first roommate I had, he was from Beverly. He and I are still contacting each other in emails this morning. I think we've had three already today.

DePue: And what's your roommate's name?

Podlasek: His name is Carmody. He's Richard Carmody. And he's a retired bankruptcy lawyer from Alabama, now lives in North Carolina.

DePue: So another kid from the neighborhood that made good.

Podlasek: Well, he lived a little different neighborhood in Chicago, Beverly, around the Beverly area, but he went to St. Ignatius High School. And so most of them do that. The whole Western Golf Evans Scholar program is a whole case by itself, ten thousand alums, the largest private-funded scholarship program. Today if you get an Evans Scholarship, it's worth $100,000 to go to college. And that's what they advertise.

DePue: And only because you were a caddy did you get that opportunity?

Podlasek: That's the only way you can qualify.

DePue: You mean it's all through being a caddy for somebody?

Podlasek: Every person has to be a caddy to get the scholarship.

DePue: Interesting.

Podlasek: And it's put together by the members of the country clubs around Chicago, around the country now, all around the country. So started with Northwestern and grew all over. There's a thousand people in college right now.

DePue: Bob, one of the most fateful, eventful days of your life was the day you stumbled onto this guy who knew about caddying.

Podlasek: And his name was Red, yeah. He got me going. And he taught me how to hitchhike, which was big because I always hitchhiked after that, all over, you know, around the country. But it was just serendipity that I just sort of ran into this guy who's at the edge of town hitchhiking. Said, "Where you going? What are you doing?" You know.

DePue: Was your neighborhood at the edge of Chicago at that time?

Podlasek: What do you mean?

DePue: Was Willow Springs at the edge of Chicago at that time?

Podlasek: There was couple of towns in between Willow Springs and Chicago, the boundaries of Chicago, maybe three or four.

DePue: How about west of there?

Podlasek: West it was pretty open. Lemont was the next town along the river. Now it's pretty well populated. Lemont has grown immensely. Willow Springs has grown quite a bit too because of the apartments and everything on the other side of the river.

DePue: When you were in high school, what were your strongest academic interests at the time?

Podlasek: I just hung in there. Just did what I had to do.

DePue: (laughs) I wasn't expecting to hear this.

Podlasek: Huh? Yeah, I just, I did what every course required, and that was it. But you got to realize, I went to a school that was taught by the Carmelite priests, and if I didn't do my algebra homework, the priest would call on you. If you

didn't do it, he'd call you up to the front of the classroom. You'd have to touch your ankles, and they'd whip you with a belt. So you quickly learned maybe doing your algebra was a good idea. And that was very influential in the behavior of the students in my class. Now, when I had a nun teaching English, she wouldn't do that, so sloughed that off.

DePue: What would happen if you went home and you complained to your parents about having your butt whipped?

Podlasek: Priest is right. End of story. Huh?

DePue: So you didn't go home and tell them?

Podlasek: You didn't go home and tell them. And then you learned how to avoid getting your butt whipped. (laughter) You did your homework. And I was big at mentally rehearsing my homework laying in bed. When I didn't do it, I was pretty ready to do it, you know.

DePue: Were you taking Latin in high school?

Podlasek: No, my brother took Latin. I took Spanish. So Joliet Catholic had a teacher from Spain, from Castille, who was teaching Spanish, and they sort of forced me into taking four years of high school Spanish. So when I showed up at the University of Illinois and I was an engineering student, I realize that my four years of Spanish enabled me to fulfill the language requirement for a degree in liberal arts. So then the Evans Scholar program said well, we'll pay for two degrees, if you wanted to go. They've quit doing that now, but so I was able to work on two degrees simultaneously at the University of Illinois, one in engineering and one in liberal arts and sciences. The liberal arts science degree is in economics.

DePue: Okay. Well, I still want to spend a little bit more time in high school with you as well. Were you involved in any extracurricular activities?

Podlasek: Not too much because I lived so far away. See, I lived twenty miles from the school. Plus, I had to go home and caddy and make some money so I had money to go to high school, so I was always getting back to maybe I can make some money when I got home, kind of thing.

DePue: But you had some (unintelligible) as a caddy. I mean, you get into December, January, and February, I assume you're not out there caddying for anybody?

Podlasek: I was always available. So I caddied all through the winter.

DePue: Oh, you did?

Podlasek: Yeah. And some of the players wanted to play during the winter. And so I went along with it. Plus, my friends were in Willow Springs and not in Joliet,

so I would go back to where my high school area friends were. So when you live twenty miles away from a high school, and that happens a lot with people who are going to parochial schools in Chicago like Fenwick in Oak Park or something, students come from all over the place to go to these high schools, Loyola or St. Ignatius particularly. People went to St. Ignatius always took the train or the metro or something like that. So you know, it's tough to get high school extracurricular.

DePue: Yeah. You were coming of age in the mid to late '50s. I'm wondering if your family even had a TV when you were growing up.

Podlasek: If we did, I don't remember much. The only thing I remember is that if we would go to somebody else's house and they had a TV, we would sort of watch it a little bit. Say, huh, that's an interesting thing. And my wife, they never had a TV. She went to a one-room schoolhouse and had outdoor plumbing. But she never saw a TV either, she was growing up.

DePue: Does that mean you were a reader?

Podlasek: No. I was always out hustling. And I worked for a building contractor who lived across the street building houses on my free time also, so I became a pretty good carpenter, electrician, plumber, roofer. I learned all of those skills.

DePue: At what time did you hear about and learn about this scholarship? Were you a junior or a senior when that occurred?

Podlasek: I was probably a junior in high school. I knew it existed, and the country club I was working at had very few applicants. And the previous person to get the scholarship was a girl. So we had female caddies at this golf course. And she got a scholarship in 1956. Then I showed up in 1960 and got the next scholarship. But after that, there's been about twenty-five people from that country club that have gotten scholarship, the Evans scholarship out of the ten thousand total.

DePue: What's the name of the country club?

Podlasek: It's called Edgewood Valley. And it's just south of La Grange on Willow Springs Road.

DePue: Did you learn how to play golf yourself?

Podlasek: I did, as a caddy. My brother worked in the pro shop. So I played golf off and on, you know, from time to time.

DePue: Once you hear about this scholarship and you think, hey, that's a great opportunity for me, what did you see for your career after college?

Podlasek: Never have thought about it. I didn't see it as this great opportunity. It was just the caddy master said apply. We need somebody to apply, and apply for this thing. It's like Fred said, "Hey, why don't you apply?" And I went, "Oh, all right," you know. It's not like I had this vision that I want to go to college and be an engineer. Then I had to pick a major. So since I was also working construction building houses, I thought civil engineering's my major.

DePue: Simple as that?

Podlasek: It was simple as that, and then I didn't like civil engineering, and since I always was taking cars apart, putting them together, I had a motorbike when I was twelve. I had some mechanical skills, so then I switched to mechanical engineering.

DePue: What didn't you like about civil engineering?

Podlasek: I really don't know why I switched.

DePue: It's another one of those decisions, though, Bob, that changed the trajectory of your entire life.

Podlasek: Oh yeah, but it was not this planned kind of thing. It was, there's an opportunity, and that's basically what I did. When I saw an opportunity, I seized it. When I saw an opportunity to make money, I seized it. And you know, soon as I talked to this guy hitchhiking and he said you can make five dollars a day, dollar signs jumped out my eyes. (laughter)

DePue: That was real money back then.

Podlasek: That was real money, and I didn't want to tell my brother about it until I could get it figured out. And but then now there's a whole group of people that take kids, sixth and seventh grade in Chicago, they're called Murphy Scholars, and get them ready to apply for these scholarships. That's another whole program in Chicago that helps low-income people.

DePue: Okay, you described how you ended up in mechanical engineering. Tell me the decision to go into economics as well.

Podlasek: Well, I liked college. It was a heck of a better deal than I had anywhere else. So I said I might as well stick it out and make this last as long as I can. So I started in 1960 and graduated in 1972.

DePue: But you said you had a double major and the second major was in economics, right?

Podlasek: Right, undergraduate degrees, right. And the money was there. The scholarship was there.

DePue: So why economics versus all the other things that you could have been taking?

Podlasek: Why did I take that? I had one economics course that was required for mechanical engineering. I was looking at geography, felt the job market was kind of weak. I looked at psychology. Said, eh, I don't know about that. And so I looked at all the majors that were in liberal arts, and I thought economics would be the most beneficial. And the biologies were too much, and the real thing is that I had my language requirement fulfilled. Other people who were doing the same thing I was doing were struggling with their German and their math and their foreign language. I didn't have to struggle. I got sixteen hours of credit towards my degree with my high school Spanish.

DePue: How well do you speak Spanish today, Bob?

Podlasek: Not at all. Well, I recognize it, of course, and everything, but you know, a little bit I can get along with.

DePue: Were you working while you're at the university?

Podlasek: Well, I worked for my meals all the time. So that enabled me to get food for five or six days. And then so I'd work at a fraternity or sorority, serve up the meals. In fact, as everybody in this Evans Scholar program did that same thing, so there was a network of people. You found jobs and that sort of thing.

DePue: Were you in a fraternity?

Podlasek: Well, the Evans Scholar program had its house, which is part of the inner fraternity council, but it was not per se a Greek letter fraternity kind of thing. Now, whether or not they're in the inner fraternity council yet, I don't know. But the Evans Scholar program has houses, places where people live at about twenty-one universities around the country now. There were twelve when I started.

DePue: And University of Illinois was one of them?

Podlasek: Right, Wisconsin, Marquette, Northwestern at the time.

DePue: Well, that explains why those other two schools ended up on the list.

Podlasek: Yeah, right, right, because they were on the list. Minnesota has one. And Evans Scholar alumni are very loyal. And they have worked out deals with universities. And this whole thing with first generation, diversity, and stuff like that, the universities sort of say, hey, we got to snuggle up to the Evans Scholar program because they'll help our diversity numbers.

DePue: Was a kid named Podlasek a part of the diversity plan back then?

Podlasek: No, as a first generation, but that was it, yeah.

DePue: What did your parents think about, our son's going to University of Illinois?

Podlasek: Hey, they weren't in favor of it. Get a job. What are you doing?

DePue: Your dad would have preferred that you got a good paying job?

Podlasek: He didn't say much, but he wasn't happy, but he did give me $100 a year to go to college, and that was it.

DePue: He wasn't happy about you going to college?

Podlasek: Well, he suggested I do something else. He thought I should be a tradesman of some kind. And I could have made it as a finishing carpenter or electrician, there's no question in my mind, or a plumber. I could have made it.

DePue: And making good money doing all of those.

Podlasek: I could have made good money, oh yeah. I probably would have owned a construction company and built houses and made some good money on that. I'm not good at bricklaying. I'm not good at cement finishing, although I've done it. It's just not in my skill set.

DePue: But you chose instead to go to college on this scholarship. What a sweet deal that sounds like. And at the time, the first year or so you're in college—where do you think this is leading?

Podlasek: I'm just struggling because my study skills were weak. My background, despite what I believed, what I thought, really wasn't that good. So I had to work hard to undo my bad study habits and relearn good study habits. So that became a pretty good challenge, but fortunate I recognized that. I recognized that my skillset for studying and learning was not adequate, but my skillset for being inquisitive and getting serendipity, you know, and wandering aimlessly and finding pleasant things always prevailed. And that's what got me through. I finally refined my cognitive work ethic to match my hands-on work ethic. While in college in 1963, I took $800 that I had saved and went to Europe for 10 weeks. After that in 1964, I was hired by AC Nielsen to do surveys during the summer east of the Mississippi River in the United States. Both experiences were very eye-opening.

DePue: Okay, you started college in 1960, is that right?

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: So when did you get your college degree?

Podlasek: Nineteen sixty-six I got both undergraduate degrees simultaneously.

DePue: Okay, so because you had that double major it took a little bit longer.

Podlasek: Right, an extra semester, yeah.

DePue: At that point in American history there was a draft, and everybody had to check that block off.

Podlasek: Right, right.

DePue: Now, how did that play out for you?

Podlasek: Well, I was aware that there's this war in Vietnam thing.

DePue: Well, that would have been towards the middle or late part of your college years.

Podlasek: Right, but already things were getting a little rambunctious on campuses and stuff like that. And then about '66 or—I think '66, my roommate and I, we drove out to Berkeley and hung out for about three weeks. So I wanted to figure out what's going on over here. Why are these guys dressed in dresses?

DePue: This is the early part of the hippie movement?

Podlasek: Early part of the hippie movement. When I first hit Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley I couldn't believe what I was seeing. And then Golden Gate Park, sort of begging for food there.

DePue: You saw people doing that or you were?

Podlasek: I was too. I put my hands out and got the food from the food servers. That was not unusual because in this story I left out the fact that in 1963, just on a lark, I bought a ticket to go to Europe, and I convinced a friend of mine from one of mine from Willow Springs who was a grade school friend who lived down the street to go along. And we went, flew to Paris for three months, and didn't have a plan or anything, ended up buying an old taxi and drove around and hitchhiked through Europe. And so I made it for total cost of $800 for Europe in the summer. But I lived on the land and youth hostiles all the time. So I got accustomed to figuring it out.

DePue: We got into all this by asking about the draft. You would have been eligible for the draft in 1960. Did you have a student deferment?

Podlasek: I had a student deferment, and then when I graduated, I picked up a job for a company called Magnavox in Champaign. And it was an engineering job, and the company had contracts to make military guidance systems for tanks and stuff like that, electronic things. And when I was getting close to the draft, I was familiar with the ladies in human resources. They said if you ever need a

letter, let me know, and I'll write one for you to get out of the draft. So they did. (laughs)

DePue: And that would have been 1966?

Podlasek: Sixty-six, '67.

DePue: And in 1960, practically nobody knew about what was going on in Vietnam. By 1966 it's a completely different story.

Podlasek: I did follow Sputnik all the time, of course, and spent some time running, trying to angle to work at Kennedy Space Center.

DePue: Sputnik was '57.

Podlasek: Seven, right.

DePue: So while you were still in high school.

Podlasek: Right. And you know, it scared people. And the end of the world was coming, but never did.

DePue: Well, it was the height of the Cold War, and if the Russians can put a Sputnik up, that means that they can put nuclear warheads and land in the United States, and we can't.

Podlasek: Right. And that was influential with me. I was concerned about that. And I thought, maybe I should work at Kennedy Space Center, and I tried to get jobs there. And I had a job offer, but I didn't take it.

DePue: Well, Kennedy Space Center, so that would have been, once you'd gotten to college, later on in—

Podlasek: Right, when I graduated as a degree in mechanical engineering I would do that.

DePue: Okay, I follow you. I wanted to spend some more time on your college years though because as I said in the preface of all this, that snapshot of what college life was like when you're a student is something that I wanted to develop more fully. So describe, if you can, the academic climate when you first got there, those first two or three years that you're in college.

Podlasek: The basic thing was you better learn how to study because your instructors would say look to the left, look to the right, those people won't be here. Especially in chemistry and physics and math. That had an impression, either you kept going or not. Plus, I was with a bunch of other people in a similar situation. We all fed off of each other. And that Evans Scholar house with a hundred students on Green Street really kept everybody together, and people

helped each other and that sort of thing. And so, the first couple years it was a struggle, but just like anything else, you just sort of went with the flow and did what you had to do and past your courses and get going.

DePue: Did the university at that time have a really solid reputation as having an excellent engineering school?

Podlasek: They did. And it was one of the top engineering schools. It's been one of the top ten engineering schools all the time. And I think I worked for the mechanical engineering department off and on on things. So I got a sense of what was going on, and for some reason I got involved in compressible fluid flow thermodynamics as an okay in a in a you and I are 3507 get quite a ways to go picnicked on 68 min. you get my message well I thought I don't help everybody some little way the only hitch is this could be key ash interest, but then I took the course, graduate level course as an undergrad, and I realized I didn't want to do that. (laughter)

DePue: Give me a snapshot, picture of the faculty at the time. B

Podlasek: There were some people with master's degrees who had some industrial experience. And then there were some young PhDs, and then there's some older PhDs. There was a group, Helmut Korst, who was the department chair, he was from Germany, and Konzo, the associate, was from Japan, very good researchers and everything like that.

DePue: Had they come to the United States after World War II?

Podlasek: Yeah, or maybe before. I don't know. But they were in mechanical engineering. Konzo was in heating and air conditioning, and Korst was in compressible flow, which was rocket engine design, rocket flow.

DePue: Well, that's interesting, and he's from Germany.

Podlasek: Oh yeah, he wrote a lot of papers in compressible flow, which means that the flow is faster than the speed of sound. So incompressible flow would be slower. The velocity of the molecules is less than the speed of sound.

DePue: Were there a lot of Vietnam veterans who were in the faculty? Excuse me, not Vietnam, World War II veterans?

Podlasek: Not that I remember. Just back up. Bradley did have some but not at the University of Illinois. So that veteran would have to get a PhD because there was a sort of requirement that people had PhDs if they were hired after 1955 or something like that.

DePue: Any women on the faculty?

Podlasek: Not that I know of.

DePue: Any minorities on the faculty?

Podlasek: You had Asian minorities and others, but you didn't have any African American members on the faculty.

DePue: How typical was it to have a foreign-born faculty?

Podlasek: Oh, about twenty percent.

DePue: In the engineering and mechanics fields?

Podlasek: Yeah.

DePue: How about in some of the humanities areas. Would they be less?

Podlasek: Zero, yeah.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: I mean, if they were, they were fluent in English. They were totally assimilated in our culture and that sort of thing.

DePue: How would you, given your entire career, how would you measure their quality as professors, as teachers?

Podlasek: Well, I don't have any pluses or minuses. They offered the material. You learn the material, and you did your research to figure out what they were talking about. Almost all of this in engineering is not the kind of material you understand the first time you hear it or second time you hear it. So you have to really go through it three or four times to grasp a concept, as an example, thermodynamics.

DePue: Well, let's turn from the faculty to your fellow students. How would you measure their abilities and qualities?

Podlasek: They were all motivated. They did the work. The ones I remember, I'm still in contact with, they did what they had to do. They were looking forward to graduating. Some went into the military, by the way. George Muellner became one of the top guys in the Air Force. He's passed away now. Rich Carmody, t was a captain in Vietnam, the guy I was writing with today. So a good number of them from this Evans Scholar group went into the military afterwards.

DePue: These fields that you were specializing in, especially on the engineering and the mechanical side of things, traditionally they're male-centric worlds. Was that the case when you were a student there?

Podlasek: Yeah, they were male-centric, although there were a few females in there. But it was sort of a blend between theory and practice where you had all the

theoretical concepts which are numbers based, and then you have how does that match the real world? So I've always tried to look at, how do you live what you learned? So how do you take this theory and live with it? And so you have to blend that. You're sort of the bridge in between. And so the problem I felt that females had was that they didn't take their car apart, pull the engine in the evening and put it back in again for school the next day. They weren't working as a carpenter or an electrician. They weren't building computers. The females just didn't do it. It's just like female athletes at that time. There's no female track team or no female baseball team, you know, in high school at that time. So as it turned out, you know, my wife could have been an excellent athlete all the way around, and there was just no opportunities.

DePue: But you've described, in terms of the women, the female students not tearing cars apart, they would have had that opportunity or did they not have that opportunity?

Podlasek: Well, I'm guessing they don't have the opportunity. I've never thought about that, as to why. But now I know numerous female professors in mechanical engineering, and they've all come up in different routes. But some of them are extremely hands-on, in fact is hands-on because one of them trimmed a fingernail off with a table saw, but—(laughter)

DePue: It only takes a split second for something like that.

Podlasek: It does. It does. I know her well and her whole history, and she just was a person who built things and did things, in contrast to her brothers. Yeah?

DePue: How about minority students at that point in your life? Were there many on campus?

Podlasek: Not that I can recall.

DePue: Foreign students?

Podlasek: Not in my circle or not that I can recall. This is now the '60s. And I'm just taking time to think. I just didn't see the foreign students or anything. And that's important because the cognitive work ethic of the international students is so much higher than the cognitive work ethic of the American students. So the American students tend to party more in college, but when you have international students to compete with in the classes, the competition was pretty stiff because they were ready to do the homework.

DePue: But while you're in college it sounds like that just wasn't part of the climate, or that wasn't the case because they weren't there.

Podlasek: Just wasn't there at the University of Illinois. Now, maybe on some of the west coast schools. I'm just trying to think a little bit about my trips to

Berkeley, whether I thought maybe there I saw more international students. But that was ’66.

DePue: Okay. And I’m going to, still at the college level, take it to some of the things that are happening in the larger world, and especially when you first got there, that 1960 presidential election is a famous one in American history.

Podlasek: It is, yeah.

DePue: In part because of what had happened up in Chicago.

Podlasek: Yes.

DePue: People voting the way they’re expected to vote, perhaps.

Podlasek: Even better than that. (laughter)

DePue: You’re hinting that you think maybe there was a little bit of vote fraud going on in that election?

Podlasek: Yeah, I mean, there’s always vote fraud in Chicago. It’s just how you define vote fraud. If you’re saying somebody’s changing someone’s ballot the answer is no, but if you’re saying you’re going to vote this way or your tree gets cut down in front of your house or your garbage can gets destroyed or you don’t get the favors, I mean, it’s just like Russia, you know. Ninety-nine percent of the people vote one way. Not ninety-nine. I should say 90 percent. I had a course in Russian. I have a friend who’s a professor of Russian history, and he did a course. You know, people consistently vote for Putin or their party all the time. Why do they do that? Well, it’s in their self-interest.

DePue: Was your family JFK supporters then in that election?

Podlasek: I think so. You just know what you’re supposed to do. You don’t talk about it.

DePue: Well, how did you feel about Kennedy?

Podlasek: Well, Kennedy came to the University of Illinois and came on campus.

DePue: During the election campaign?

Podlasek: Yes, he did. And I was there at the thing, and I watched the whole thing go. At that time I was a strong Democrat, so I’m sure I voted for Kennedy.

DePue: Well, you wouldn’t have been able to vote.

Podlasek: That’s right. I was eighteen, right. But he came to campaign, and a few of my friends were really antagonistic towards Kennedy. I wasn’t. But you know, they were trying to spit on their hand and shake his hand and stuff like that. But I felt, yeah, of course Kennedy was going to win. Of course there was

voter fraud, you know, when he won. Illinois was a day late or day and a half late in counting the votes, and then the people in southern Illinois put in their votes, and then Daley came up with the rest of the votes he needed.

DePue: Daley, okay, he is married that time, so yeah.

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah. But the machine, you know, he was a strong supporter of Kennedy, and I was appreciative of it. I was into this. I completely defended benevolent dictators, and do whatever you have to do in the election to get your benevolent dictator to do that. That's the way I was trained.

DePue: Goes back to the importance of Tony in your life again.

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah, importance of the whole neighborhood, you know. We're all in this together, and we don't need anybody messing anything up. We got it working.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's move forward three years then from him being elected in November of 1960, November 22, 1963. I wonder if you remember that day.

Podlasek: Absolutely. Absolutely. I remember I was working in a kitchen. And the announcement came that Kennedy was shot in Dallas, and people were just so distraught. I was too. And you know, you wonder what's going to happen to the world? What's going on? How could this be? And everything. So then I followed every detail of the shooting and followed every twist and turn of the Kennedy shooting. YI spent a lot of time reading in the libraries and following it and that sort of thing.

DePue: Were you watching any TV at that time? Did you see Jack Ruby?

Podlasek: Shoot? I saw a replay of Jack Ruby shooting—I can't think of the guy's name.

DePue: Oswald.

Podlasek: Oswald, yeah. You know, I got to say, during that time I would go to the library to study, and for a little change of pace I'd go to the Russian library and read *Pravda and Izvestia*.

DePue: In English.

Podlasek: In English. And they were months behind, but I figured out that the Russian library was a good place to study because nobody goes there. I could find a little corner and study, and I'd wander through the books on the book shelves, and then I continually went to book stores all the time and libraries all over. I always do that. But so I was a little bit familiar with the Russian thing. And I did the *Pravda Izvestia* thing because of Sputnik. And trying to figure out, can they really do what people are saying they're doing? Kind of thing.

DePue: You mean from a technical standpoint?

Podlasek: Technical point of view, right. Yeah, of course they launched the thing. Of course, we know how to do those calculations. Of course, we know theoretically how to do it. Somebody just did it. How to build a rocket, get enough thrust to move outside the Earth's gravity pull and circle the Earth and come back and have thrust rockets to alter your trajectory had. I mean, that was pretty standard knowledge. I mean, once I got to college it was standard knowledge, but in '57 it wasn't. But then I sort of had that interest in *Pravda and Izvestia*. I think it was because the library, they had a Russian library, was up on the third floor of the library, and nobody ever went up there, and I was looking for a quiet place where I didn't see anybody or know anybody to distract me. (laughter)

DePue: Because you were easily distracted, Bob?

Podlasek: Because I was easily distracted somehow. I can't figure this out. (laughter)

DePue: Well, some people, at that point in their lives, as easily distracted by the co-eds as well.

Podlasek: Yeah, that was my problem too. So I had a heavy dose of that.

DePue: Well, so we've got what's going on internationally, but nationally with the civil rights movement, were you following that at all?

Podlasek: I followed it a little bit. I mean, it's there, but it's not the kind of thing that people would argue about or anything else. Later on in the '60s, going to bars with English majors and stuff, there'd be discussions of that, but it wasn't that big of a deal. I mean, I got to say that 1964 my summer job was, again, networks and connections with Evans Scholars, but AC Nielsen hired me to survey east of the Mississippi of the United States and do ten surveys a day for the summer. I drew the south. I don't know. There was five college students were selected to survey the United States. I applied for this job because I had a connection. And I had south of the Mason Dixon line, so I spent a lot of time in the south. This is 1964. I saw a lot of the fountains which were Black only and that sort of thing. I did. I had Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana. Tennessee, New York, Michigan. I didn't do anything in Mississippi.

DePue: When you say Nielsen—

Podlasek: AC Nielsen, the survey company.

DePue: When I think Nielsen I'm always thinking the TV ratings.

Podlasek: Right, but they had an entire market research business. So I was surveying a sample of department stores, all of the big ones, percentage of the next

category, next category, and they were going to draw a sample of goods that are being sold. They were going to hire these people to let them audit their books to see what kind of products are being sold. So a company like Levi or a perfume company sends their goods to a distributor, and it gets distributed out. They wanted to know little finer detail, where is it being sold and during what timeframe? So Nielsen did all sorts of market research, and I was working in that area. The interesting thing is I'm an engineering student. I'm the only engineering student that applies out of 130 people, and they hire me. (laughter) Why did they hire me? I figured out that they saw that I could survive any environment, hitchhiking, doing anything. You know, they could send me around the country and I wouldn't get lost. I'd be able to make my own reservations for airplanes and cars and motels.

DePue: Well, I would think also the economics side of your preparation would be more relevant in that field.

Podlasek: Yeah, but it was basically survival. Because I had Gary, Indiana; Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem.

DePue: Some of the rougher neighborhoods around.

Podlasek: Right. And I had the Cuban area of Miami, which was not too bad, but—

DePue: What year did you go to Europe?

Podlasek: Nineteen sixty-three.

DePue: And was that in the summer?

Podlasek: Summer, yeah, my summer.

DePue: So that was before the assassination as well.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: Right in the middle of your schooling then.

Podlasek: Right, but I had been saving up money. I had the money. I put my money down for the airline and had $500 extra, and that was it.

DePue: What did that experience, the three months in Europe, teach you?

Podlasek: Shocking experience. Tom Schonauer, a neighbor from Willow Springs and student at Carbondale, was the guy that was with me. We talk about it all the time. I talk to Tom about every two weeks on the phone now. And he just said it was mind-blowing experience, for both of us. So we traveled together for about a month and a half, and then we hitchhiked individually for a month and

a half. And just culturally and everything else, we didn't know anything. He was in the same boat I was, first generation.

DePue: But you got to be a little bit trusting and innocent to be going through all of that, I would think.

Podlasek: It just, you knew you were going to survive. You knew if you slept on a park bench it didn't matter. You were just confident in your street smarts. And that was the other thing you learned in Bridgeport is street smarts.

DePue: How to get through that neighborhood when it wasn't your turf?

Podlasek: Right, right, right. I mean, if you recall, there were two announcers for the Chicago White Sox about ten years ago who announced the game for the White Sox game, Comiskey Park, and they were walking downtown all the way to the Hyatt over at McCormick Place at 1:00 in the morning after getting a few beers at a bar around Comiskey Park—they got the shit kicked out of them. They got beat up pretty bad because they were walking through a neighborhood they didn't belong. And they were white, and the people who beat them up were white. It's not a racial thing. People say it's racial, but it happens both ways.

DePue: Do you have any cherished stories or memories about that time in Europe?

Podlasek: Lots of them, yeah.

DePue: One or two that you're willing to share?

Podlasek: Yeah, well, going into East Berlin was always a big deal. And the youth hostels in the Netherlands that I stayed at, you know, along the Zuiderzee and that sort of thing. My staying in Paris was always big, Barcelona. I spent my twenty-first birthday in Monte Carlo in the casino. I tried to get in the casino, and the guy demanded I have my passport, so I opened up my passport, and here it was my twenty-first birthday. I didn't even know what day it was, you know. (laughter)

DePue: If it was one day before you wouldn't have gotten into the casino?

Podlasek: Right. Didn't know.

DePue: Was language a bit of a problem for you? Just didn't worry about it?

Podlasek: Didn't worry about it. You just sort of ask people to help you and that sort of thing. You improvise kind of thing.

DePue: How did you get into East Germany? Did I hear you right?

Podlasek: Yeah, we had our little car, and we drove from Hanover to Berlin, and then we went through Checkpoint Charlie, went into East German East Berlin, and then we were leaving, couldn't read the signs, and then we ended up heading east farther towards the Polish border. Finally the gendarmes caught us and turned us around. We went back to Hanover.

DePue: Any impressions at that time? It's 1963, summer.

Podlasek: Yeah, right. I mean, what, the Berlin Wall. We were right at that. Grunewald Forest is where we slept.

DePue: The Grunewald?

Podlasek: Forest in Berlin, which is the big woods in Berlin.

DePue: What was the name of the forest?

Podlasek: I think it's called Grunewald.

DePue: This is only couple years after the Berlin Wall was even built.

Podlasek: Right. And the guards who watched us go through the Checkpoint Charlie when our car quit running, we had to push it through because we knew we could get it started again because we had this old rickety car.

DePue: You drove into East Berlin?

Podlasek: Right, because we purchased a car in Paris, an old taxi cab, and used that to drive around and sleep in and go to youth hostiles to take a shower.

DePue: That would be quite a memory.

Podlasek: Yeah, I mean, every day we'd say, where we going next?

DePue: Did you keep any kind of a diary or a journal?

Podlasek: No, I didn't even want to take a picture because I was going to capture it all in my mind so I wouldn't forget it, but I did take a few pictures.

DePue: How often were you calling the folks back home?

Podlasek: Zero.

DePue: And what did you hear once you got back home, from your folks?

Podlasek: Well, they were just elated to see me get off the plane at O'Hare. In the international terminal there was a little place up above. They were standing, and they saw me come back looking dragged, drunk, and but they were happy

to see me. They were adamant not for me to go. They didn't want me to go. They didn't want it.

DePue: So they spent three months worrying about you.

Podlasek: They did, and I didn't even worry about them worrying, which influenced my behavior with my own kids. (laughter)

DePue: You decided that they need to be paying closer attention to things maybe or—?

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah. But it's that hitchhiking mentality that I picked up from this guy when I was twelve in June that kept me going. I wouldn't hesitate to hitchhiking to school, high school, you know, anywhere.

DePue: Well, that says a lot about the climate of those times versus today as well.

Podlasek: Right, right, but a lot of people hitchhiked. You know, that wasn't a thing. But that's back to the trust and back to, there's just few contrarians at that era relative to what we see today. And there was always a belief in the cardinal, in the pope, in Daley, in Kennedy. Everybody believed. Politically, people trusted their political leaders and everything. And I think that's because the immigrant class were so happy to be in United States and not in Eastern Europe or not Germany or England. They were all here because America was the land of opportunity. This political class was better than what they had experienced. They felt they trusted the government, like they do in Finland, for example, or like they do in Sweden a little bit.

DePue: Well, I want to go back to East Berlin.

Podlasek: Yeah, I'm sure.

DePue: Because you're an observant guy. You're going from West Berlin into East Berlin. How would you compare the two that you were seeing?

Podlasek: Well, it was night and day. The poor people, the people were so poor in East Berlin. And they had this Checkpoint Charlie where you'd go a little bit, and then you'd have to make a ninety-degree turn to the right, and then you had the zigzag pattern, and they had all these guards there with their guns looking at you. Not a wise move to do that, by the way, to drive through into East Berlin. (laughter) But we wanted to see how they lived, and of course, it was hard to talk to the people but observing the quality of their houses, their backyards, their little gardens, and all of the things that they had. Outside of Berlin, you know, to grow vegetables and that sort of thing, and how they dressed, their clothes and that sort of thing.

DePue: My guess is they were very careful of how they took care of their personal gardens.

Podlasek: Oh, they were. That's their food. That was their everything. Now, if you switch back to 2000, 1999 and 2003, I worked for a Fraunhofer Institute in Dresden, Germany, and my coworkers were East Germans during, you know, when the wall was up there and everything. So when I would go to dinner with them and everything in Dresden, we would talk about this. And so it was a great comparison between that and how they sort of accepted the East German government. And they had accepted the fact that the government was tracking them and keeping track. And people were snitching on them and that sort of thing. And they all got along with that.

DePue: Okay. So you've got all of these experiences you've had that have enriched your life in ways you couldn't have imagined even when you began those ventures.

Podlasek: It's serendipity. It just happens.

DePue: And the climate that you're talking about, a trusting climate. Then you get to the issue of the Vietnam War, and I think, if I can speculate here, we begin to see American society begin to chip away at that trust.

Podlasek: And break apart.

DePue: So tell me about the climate on campus by the time you get to '65 and '66. Vietnam ends up being on the news every night.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: And it's the constant concern of anybody who's a male college student at the time. I'll let you pick it up from there.

Podlasek: Number one, of course, I had the deferment. The second thing is I was really inquisitive, so I drove out to Berkeley to see because Berkeley was at the cutting-edge of all of this stuff in Telegraph Avenue and the people yelling and screaming and living in the streets and everything. And then I'd come back to Champaign-Urbana, and not so bad until the riots started, and then the national guard and the horses and everything else were on Green Street.

DePue: Riots on campus?

Podlasek: On campus, right.

DePue: When was that?

Podlasek: I can't tell you. It had to be '67, '68, somewhere in that era. I don't remember, but I remember leaving my office and standing outside when all the riots were going on. And what are you going to do? I was supportive of the Vietnam War. We had to do it. We had to fight communism. And we had this cadre of

people who were against it. And I tried to understand their position, tried to. And I spent a lot of time in bars talking to people about it. (laughs)

DePue: When you say cadre of people, faculty or students or a combination?

Podlasek: Well, the faculty in engineering were not part of it. The engineering students were not part of it. The liberal arts students were. So one of my roommates was an English major working on his master's and PhD in English. So I went with the English students most of the time and not the engineering students, except for Friday nights.

DePue: Friday nights was bar night?

Podlasek: Was bar night for the engineering students.

DePue: Then you'd go hang with the engineering students?

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: Okay, and other nights you'd be hanging with the English students?

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: Hitting the bars?

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: So the engineering thing was interesting because about 4:00 Professor Joe Morrow would say, "Okay, time to go drinking," and he would start drinking at a bar on Green Street. And then he would get everybody to go to his house on the west side of Champaign, and they would have a barbecue outside, and everybody would drink until about midnight. And his wife went along with all of this. He was a professor of theoretical and applied mechanics. And he was a ultimate party animal, and he orchestrated it all. Occasionally, we would have Japanese or Indian students as graduate students in theoretical and applied mechanics. And it would all just be a party whereas the English majors were serious, deep thinkers about I don't know what, but they were deep.

DePue: Okay. This is about the time then you went from being an undergrad, so—

Podlasek: Sixty-six, yeah. I got my degree in '66, but I started early in '66 with my master's degree.

DePue: I thought there was a job in between there as well that you had mentioned before.

Podlasek: Yeah, there was a job at Packer Engineering for a year in Naperville.

DePue: But you were still a student at that time?

Podlasek: I was taking classes part-time at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: And then I was working for this company that did product liability lawsuits. So the chairman of the theoretical and applied mechanics department was on the board of this company, and he said, "I think you ought to work here. You'd have a good time." So I took that.

DePue: This is at the University of Illinois, Chicago?

Podlasek: No, this was at Champaign. I became a graduate student in theoretical and applied mechanics. The chairman of that department, Tom Dolan, was on the board of this company in Naperville called Packer Engineering that did product liability cases, expert witness testimony in legal cases, investigation of accidents and stuff like that. He said, "I think you'd enjoy this job," so he told me, "Take this." Take a year off and do this job. So I did.

DePue: And while you're doing that you're taking classes at Chicago?

Podlasek: Right, I'm riding the train to Chicago, yeah.

DePue: Okay. But with the intention of going back to grad school?

Podlasek: Right, right.

DePue: Was your draft status—had it changed?

Podlasek: No. It seemed to be. I don't think I spent more than thirty minutes thinking about my draft status in all that time.

DePue: But by this time we're talking '67 timeframe.

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: At the height of the draft.

Podlasek: Right. And I knew there was a lottery, and I knew that sort of thing. And I was sort of saying, well, I'll deal with it when I have to deal with it. And I wasn't opposed to going into the military. So I said, if I have to go, I have to go, and that's it, you know. I mean, it's not like I had these trepidations about going into the military.

DePue: What led, then, to the decision to do graduate school rather than go out into the working world? Because you've got some very marketable skills by the time you get your two degrees.

Podlasek: Yeah, I had a lot of job interviews and that sort of thing, but I sort of liked university life, the freedom. And plus, the rate of learning, where you could venture into areas where you don't belong and explore. And so that was always an attraction to me.

DePue: So this is an extension, same kind of thing about, let's go to Europe and figure out, you know, just kind of bum around and learn.

Podlasek: Right, right, let's see what we can learn. I mean, I've been doing that all my life. So I might go to a medical robotics conference in Anaheim, California, be the only engineering person there, all the MDs. And fact is, I've done that, you know. I just do that.

DePue: Okay, so let's now shift gears and talk about, I don't know if it kind of blends right in, but the graduate school experience and how that was different from your undergraduate degree experience.

Podlasek: Well, first of all, I had an assistantship, so I had a different source of income. And it was sort of an extension of the courses, but now I had a choice of courses to take. And I was trying to put together a group of courses that I was sort of interested in. And so I got a master's degree in mechanical engineering, and that was in instrumentation and control. And when I finished that I realized I didn't like that. Then I switched into theoretical and applied mechanics because it was a general program. And then I thought I would do a thesis which combined engineering and economics. So I thought all my mathematical background in engineering and econometrics and building a model and projecting what would happen would be an interesting topic, given my background. So I spent a year or two trying to explore coming up with a topic and research in theoretical applied mechanics and economics and try to get a degree PhD with both of those degrees.

DePue: When you made the decision to go to graduate school were you all in to go all the way through to a PhD?

Podlasek: Probably. It was a year-by-year kind of decision, but if I decided to change my mind, there was this huge job market out there that was waiting.

DePue: Well, I'm wondering what your dad would have thought at that time. Here was the guy with the tenth-grade schooling who would have been fine with you if you had a nice respectable trade, and now you're doing this egghead thing.

Podlasek: Yeah. He says, "When the hell are you going to get out of college? Get a job." But he wasn't overbearing, but (laughter) he was just wondering. You know, since I was not an economic burden on him at all, there was no skin off of his thing. It worked out all right. You know, I had an uncle who was an attorney who's my mother's brother. He gave me a car one time and stuff like that, two

cars, actually. So he was a collector of cars. So you know, I got a little help from him from time to time.

DePue: Well, you said you also had an assistantship.

Podlasek: Yeah. I always had assistantships.

DePue: What kind of assistantships?

Podlasek: Well, for my master's degree I had a teaching assistantship in the division—DGS, division of general sciences at the University of Illinois. They offered a series of courses that helped LAS majors fulfill their science requirement. So it was chemistry, physics, geology, cosmology, and astronomy was the course over a two-semester basis. So I was a teaching assistant in that class. So the professors would do the lectures, and then I'd answer questions and grade the exams and grade the quizzes.

DePue: But a lot of these fields are not the fields in which you'd had the proper background in training.

Podlasek: Right, and every teaching assistant did not have the proper background. Some teaching assistants came from astronomy. Some came from engineering and physics. Some teaching assistants came from biology. Well, I missed biology. So we all had to feed off of each other to help each other.

DePue: Well, it's about this time, I would think, you start to learn more about the way the university system works as far as the professors are concerned, who let the teaching assistants do all the heavy lifting.

Podlasek: Right, you understood that, and I was active in the University of Illinois Graduate Student Association. I was always active in that.

DePue: Which is what?

Podlasek: Well, it's an organization of all the graduate students, allegedly. They'd have a president and vice president and stuff, and they would do—

DePue: Would they advocate for certain things like better pay for the—

Podlasek: Oh yeah, housing, better pay for the graduate students. And depending on who the president was, who was willing to spend more time than I was, but we would do all sorts of different events on campus. And one of them I remember that we invited Ralph Nader to come. And my wife got to sit next to him. And Ralph Nader just talked to her the whole time, didn't talk to the other six people at the dinner table, and she hasn't forgotten that either. But so I was involved in cross-campus kinds of things all the time. And so that just sort of fit.

DePue: Well, I think we need to take another quick hiatus and talk about getting married, meeting your wife and getting married. And her name?

Podlasek: Her name is Peggy, but we met in college.

DePue: What was her last name?

Podlasek: Kuehl, K-U-E-H-L.

DePue: Was she in one of your classes or—?

Podlasek: No, we just met on campus. She went out with my roommate, and I went out with another girl. We went out, double dated. He married the other girl, and I married Peggy.

DePue: And when did that happen?

Podlasek: Sixty-eight.

DePue: And where was she from?

Podlasek: Well, she's from Downers Grove, outside of Downers Grove, on a farm.

DePue: Did she have a Catholic background as well?

Podlasek: No. Actually, her father was Catholic, I think, but he never practiced it at all. Her grandfather was the barber in Hinsdale. Her father purchased eighty acres of farm land outside of Downers Grove. And then he worked over at electromotive where my father worked, where they made the locomotives, the electromotive things. They both worked in the same place, different building and never knew each other. But then he farmed eighty acres on the side. And so she had a real farm background.

DePue: Where did you guys get married?

Podlasek: Champaign-Urbana. So the other guy, Joe Hurst, who was my roommate, I have not talked to for years. So some of my college roommates, Evans Scholars, I talk to all the time, others haven't connected with.

DePue: Okay, well, returning to the college scene then, by '67 are you back at the University of Illinois campus?

Podlasek: Yeah, I'm on the campus, I think. So I may have gotten some of the years mixed up. It might have been '65 that I went to Berkeley. I went to Berkeley. I think it started in '64 when they started all the protests.

DePue: In '64 the presidential election '64 was the first time I knew there was a thing called the Vietnam War going on because it was talked about a lot during the election campaign. So it would have definitely been in the news a lot more '65

and beyond. And I don't know when the draft card burning would have started, but I would think maybe late '65, '66 timeframe.

Podlasek: Yeah, I was keeping track of it only at a distance a little bit. Like most, I thought college students, you know, some people would get all excited about it. I had my academic work to do, and I would listen and pay attention, but it's not the thing that would change my behavior any way. I was totally aware, but it wasn't the thing that's going to change your behavior. You know, for some people it changed their behavior. But it didn't for me.

DePue: And those years, '65 on, there was a pretty steep climb, build-up in Vietnam itself.

Podlasek: Exactly.

DePue: And it all came to a head about 1968. So I always like to ask people about the sequence of events in '68.

Podlasek: Okay.

DePue: And I'm sure a lot more of this will come out. So late January is the Tet Offensive.

Podlasek: Okay, I remember that.

DePue: And the Tet Offensive, and you recall that a lot of Americans kind of changed their attitude because Westmoreland, others were saying, "We're winning the war."

Podlasek: Yeah.

DePue: And then it didn't appear, after the Tet Offensive, to be that we were winning the war. I don't know if you have any more comments about that.

Podlasek: Yeah, because that started shaping my attitude. These people in Washington don't know what they're talking about. I mean, they're just propogandists. I mean, I've got to factcheck everything they say. So it started in '61 when I was in Fort Lauderdale when there were riots there. And I was right in the middle of them.

DePue: In '61?

Podlasek: Sixty-one, I think, '62.

DePue: Okay, so this would have been early in your college years.

Podlasek: Right, I went down. I hitchhiked down to Florida again.

DePue: Oh, for spring break.

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah. And I was in the middle of it, and then I would read the newspaper account of what happened, and it wasn't anything I had seen. So I'm wondering, how does this newspaper guy write this thing? Where was he at that I wasn't? Where did he come? So I just put that in the back of my mind and just let it simmer. Not a big deal.

DePue: What were the riots about at that time?

Podlasek: Nothing. It was Las Olas and Atlantic. It was about a bunch of drunken college students on a corner, and this kid who's a gymnast crawls up the light pole and up the pole that is controlling the traffic signal and is swinging back and forth on it like that. So everybody's cheering him on and everything. And that's all it was. But then it just grew, for no reason at all.

DePue: Well, maybe because there's a bunch of college kids who are drinking too much.

Podlasek: That's exactly, that's all it was. So I was eighteen, eighteen or nineteen at that time, eighteen I think. But that was another thing I did my parents didn't like. But since that time the whole thing about who do you trust in the media, but this Vietnam War was a great example of people saying things that weren't true to try to elicit some support in the culture, I think. I don't know. Maybe you have a different perspective on it, but you begin to say, do these people really know what they're doing now? When we started launching stuff at Kennedy Space Center, you know, I happened to be down there going through job interviews and stuff, and I was on the test pads and everything else. I knew that was happening because I could touch it and kick it and believe it. But you know, some things, when I could touch it and kick it and believe, see it, and I see somebody write about it, it's a different story, then I begin to wonder, you know, did they really experience it, or are they sort of making things up to do it?

DePue: So this is the analysis you're describing that you're going to return to for your entire life, I would think.

Podlasek: Well, you become more skeptical of what you read. And now I'm a voracious reader on the Internet and stuff, you know. And I still factcheck as much as I can through comments and, you know, all the time.

DePue: But go back to 1968.

Podlasek: Sure.

DePue: At the end of March, March thirty-first, Lyndon Johnson surprises everybody in the political world, and he announced that he will not run for reelection. So here's the ultimate political animal who is now consumed by all the things that are going on in his administration. And just a few days later, April fourth, Martin Luther King is assassinated. Do you remember that day?

Podlasek: I do. And again, it was a turbulent time, I felt, in our culture, but, you know, these unfortunate things, Bobby Kennedy, John Kennedy, the ’68 convention in Chicago, all of those things, Berkeley, Illinois, I just saw it as an observer. I think trying to make sense of it. You put it all together and say what’s going on? How can people behave this way?

DePue: Well, the assassination is one thing, a very traumatic experience, but then there is, as you’re alluding to, I think, the explosion of violence that happened across the country to include western side of Chicago, not far from where your family was, I would think.

Podlasek: Right, and not only that, my son lives in Oak Park, and Roosevelt Road was burned down all the way through. And all of the violence, I guess, it’s spontaneous. Having been at those minor riots in Fort Lauderdale in 1961 I saw how spontaneity just occurs. And I just know. There’s not much I can do or not much I can suggest other people to do sort of contain it or, I guess you have to let it run its course. I don’t know.

DePue: Of course, 1968 is a presidential election year. You already mentioned Robert Kennedy. His assassination was June sixth in Los Angeles right after he had won the California primary. You talked about the family being good, solid Democrats. You now have the right to vote. Who were you thinking of supporting that year?

Podlasek: I was a solid Democrat. I was supporting whoever the Democrats wanted to support.

DePue: You didn’t have any particular Democrat candidate you were leaning towards in the primary?

Podlasek: No, no, I was just sort of—

DePue: Didn’t vote in the primary?

Podlasek: Probably not, but I don’t know. I tried to vote in the primaries, but at that stage in my life, I kept abreast of all, you know, McCarthy and all those people. And I kept abreast of it. None of them did anything enough to move me from just voting straight Democratic.

DePue: Okay. Democratic convention, which you mentioned as well, that’s in August in Chicago. I bet you knew some people who went there. Did you go there?

Podlasek: I did not. And I thought that was overstepping things. And then you begin to realize that some of these people are just wannabee terrorists and wannabe disruptive. They’re just looking for an excuse to be disruptive. And I don’t know if it made any difference or anything else, but they were just doing that. They were bombing University of Wisconsin, killed some people and that sort of thing.

DePue: Was there an SDS chapter in Champaign?

Podlasek: Probably, but I didn't have any contact with it or anything. The closest I came—no, no, I didn't. But yeah, I just, I followed it, but you know, some people are just genetically predisposed to be contrarians.

DePue: I have gotten the sense, though, that you were doing a lot of questioning about the Vietnam War. You were possibly sympathetic with their desire to put an end to the war, to get out of Vietnam?

Podlasek: Well, I don't know about getting out. It was more like controlling communism and do what we have to do to control communism. And I don't know. I mean, if I had to go, I had to go, is the way I saw it. But it didn't look like it was in the cards for me.

DePue: So that plays into your reaction to the rioting and the protests that were at the Democratic convention. You had to put yourself on one side of that argument, the police—lot of the police were coming from your neighborhood, it sounds like. (laughter)

Podlasek: That's right.

DePue: Or the protestors, which side would you be on?

Podlasek: I generally support the police all the time. It's the world's toughest job. You know, they're going to make mistakes. If I were a police officer—my cousins were police officers and all the rest of that, I mean, you have to have law and order. I mean, you can't have anarchy. If people attack your store, like I have relatives who have businesses in Chicago who are afraid to open. They're afraid to do anything. Their business is shot because of the protests and everything else.

DePue: You're talking about what's going on today?

Podlasek: Yeah, but it doesn't matter. Today or then, you know, you have to have some sort of order. I just think that anybody who destroys someone else's business or livelihood arbitrarily is something not right.

DePue: You mentioned there was some of this going on, protest and violence going on at the University of Illinois campus in Champaign-Urbana. What timeframe would that be, about this timeframe?

Podlasek: Probably. What I remember is National Guard and police on horses and state police on Green Street and the protestors marching down Green Street every day for a week. And once the protest is over, then they go. And what I remember is Berkeley and Telegraph Avenue and all the things out by the Berkeley student's union and the different restaurants and bars in Berkeley, and where people protesting seemed like twenty-four hours a day. And then I

remember Golden Gate Park and the people living there and protesting. But I'm an observer. I'm not a participant.

DePue: And it also sounds like your fellow students in the hard sciences, in engineering classes, they're the same status was you?

Podlasek: I think so. It's not like something—even today the faculty are not concerned.

DePue: Okay. So all of this discussion about what's going on in the larger context of the world is going back to then how the climate on the university campus is changing.

Podlasek: Right. And then, you know, it settled down for a while. And then it seems like students or university people are easily propagandized.

DePue: You were seeing that at the time?

Podlasek: Huh? No, as I look back at that, you know. You're saying, well, what's driving all of this? What's going on? And I just want to go have a beer, you know. (laughs)

DePue: Did you see more, I'll use this phrase, more activists faculty that were emerging at that time?

Podlasek: There was a limited number of activists faculty. But the spontaneity of this, I wonder if these people really think about what they're doing.

DePue: Did you see any erosion from your personal experience in terms of the quality of the education that you or others were receiving because of all this other stuff going on?

Podlasek: Not in the engineering courses. But not in the economics courses either. And I had to take some general education courses and stuff like that. And that didn'

DePue: And you're not in a position to talk about what was going on in the humanities?

Podlasek: Well, I took humanities courses, humanities 233, 232 or something, but the instructor, she wasn't in there. I had to take logic and some other courses and philosophy, and I just didn't see that kind of thing. But there were, you know, obviously, some faculty that were pretty well agitated, but you know, but it's a small number, the way I saw it, you know.

DePue: Would you have any sense at that time how the faculty would lean in the political spectrum?

Podlasek: Yeah, I interacted with a lot of different faculty, but it was probably, if I just had to pick a number, 70 percent liberal and 30, 40, 35 percent conservative.

A lot of the faculty that I interacted with were concerned about economic growth and making United States a desirable place to live, enabling people to earn an income and advance and do better for themselves. And that meant all people, all races and everyone else. I never saw anybody wanting to do other than that.

DePue: During your years in graduate school, was the student body demographics, were they changing at all?

Podlasek: Not that I perceived it.

DePue: So still not minority students, still not a lot of foreign students?

Podlasek: In the graduate school, course, there were lots of foreign students.

DePue: There were at that time?

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah, but Illinois also had a cadre of US people too. But that dynamic keeps changing, but basically, I don't see the student population changing that much, but maybe others do. I don't know. It's not something that registered.

DePue: It's not something you were probably paying attention to at the time.

Podlasek: Or if it happened, it didn't really put a mark, leave a mark in my mind. But yeah, there was a cadre of people, which I would call contrarians, who didn't believe in benevolent dictators like I did. And you know, but so what? My side's winning. (laughter) And I live in Illinois.

DePue: Well, at the time you earned your PhD in 1972, is that correct?

Podlasek: That's when I got my degree, but I think I was finished about '71.

DePue: Okay. What did you plan to do with your life after that?

Podlasek: Well, I didn't have to do any planning. The job market was pretty tight in 1970 for PhDs. And I was able to get a job at Battelle in Columbus, Ohio in 1971 or '72, '71 I think, to work full-time. And my advisor said, "Take the job. Everybody else is sitting here trying to find jobs, and you've got a job offer, so you take it." I took it and then finished my PhD while I was working in Columbus, Ohio. So then I already had a job.

DePue: Here's the last question I have for you today then, and I don't want you to get into too much about what's going on in the academic environment today, but I do what you to reflect on how those crucial years, the Vietnam years, the protest years, the civil rights movement, the emerging women's movement, et cetera, had an impact on changing the university, the academic climate.

Podlasek: I didn't perceive it as changing anything. Now, others probably did, but from my perspective, I was in favor of it. You know, I had no problems with it or anything. If it changed, I mean, I was working for the graduate student association, as one of the volunteer graduate students sitting on committees. The advancement of the minorities was happening. The problems of minorities in Chicago I was observing all the time. I think they were being treated poorly by the Democrats now and at that time. And the women's issues, I was in favor of them voting. I was in favor of all of that. God, I wanted more women in my classes. (laughs)

DePue: Well, the next time we get together, Bob, we'll talk about how you ended up in Bradley University in 1982 and then that detailed snapshot of what life was like at Bradley in 1982, so ten years later.

Podlasek: There's still a gap in here between 1972 and 1982 when I worked—

DePue: Well, we'll hear a little bit about that as well.

Podlasek: Yeah, right. But yeah, you know, I felt I was this adventurous person going into places I didn't belong, but none of that—I supported it, but it wasn't something that I always was a little bit upset with people who disrupted the businesses and the livelihood of other people. That would always—would disturb me all the time. So all right.

DePue: Well, there's much more to come. Thank you very much, Bob.

Podlasek: Okay.

(end of interview session)

Interview with Robert Podlasek

EH-A-L-2021-010

Interview # 2: April 22, 2021

Interviewer: Mark DePue

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to

DePue: Today is Thursday, April 22, 2021. This is Mark DePue. And I'm once again with Bob Podlasek. How are you this afternoon, Bob?

Podlasek: I feel pretty good. The weather's nice. Perfect day.

DePue: We started last time talking about your experiences as mentioned. This is all about what's going on in higher education. And we spent quite a bit of time what was going on in higher education when you were a student back in the early '60s, a graduate student all the way up into the early '70s, and we'll soon be getting—(phone rings) oh, see, there's technology getting in the way here.

Podlasek: I know. Peggy told me to take care of this. Okay.

DePue: Peggy would be your wife, so now those pesky little cell phones have been turned off, I know you wanted to talk a little bit from the time you finished your graduate degree and got your PhD, you went into the working world. And tell me about that timeframe.

Podlasek: Okay, I started, of course, at the university in 1960, and I graduated in 1972. So I spent twelve years, really eleven because I had one year working in between there in product liability cases, but then when I left the university it was a tight market for PhDs in theoretical and applied mechanics. But I landed a job pretty quickly at Battelle in Columbus, Ohio. So my advisor told me take that job and finish your thesis as you're working there. So that's what I did. And I spent three years working in midstream oil and gas projects. Companies would hire Battelle to do research, and I was one of the research team members of Battelle that would do research. And some of it was experimental and some of it was theoretical. I was on the experimental side. There was another group.

DePue: Midstream—

Podlasek: Oil and gas.

DePue: Is that the name of a company?

Podlasek: No, that's the name of the sector of the gas industry which takes the oil and gas from the wellhead, processes it, and brings it over to the distribution center somewhere in the country. So all these controversial pipelines are the midstream oil and gas.

DePue: I would image there's a lot of people today who think that the pipeline we've been debating for the last decade or two are the only pipelines out there. Is that the case?

Podlasek: Absolutely not. There are maps of the pipelines that crisscross the United States, and they're all over the place. And there's oil that's coming from the tar sands to Illinois and Patoka, Illinois is the central hub for all of the liquid pipelines. And if you drive there, you'll see tons of storage tanks. It's a massive area. You can look at it on Google on Earth, but that's one of the central parts, and there's one hub in Oklahoma as well, and there's a hub down in Texas. So they try to get the oil to the hub, and then they switch it around and do that, and then the other is natural gas, which is a little trickier because it's at a thousand pounds pressure or greater. So you have a little more energy in there if there's a problem.

DePue: At what depth are they burying these pipelines?

Podlasek: Generally, about three or four feet because that's—keeps it out of the way of all the people who might want to dig. But the Alaskan oil pipeline is above ground for frost heave purposes. I worked on that one, by the way, too, but they're generally below the ground and an unseen kind of thing.

DePue: So you can have agriculture going on above that?

Podlasek: Oh, absolutely, yeah. The only thing is that frost heave, if the frost is deep, if the pipeline moves; it can bend it and kink it and stuff like that.

DePue: You mentioned that was what you did for three years.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: And were you going out on sight to supervise some of these things?

Podlasek: Well, Battelle Columbus had the contract to investigate all pipeline failures in the United States and sometimes in Europe. So whenever there was a pipeline failure, then they would send one or two of us to try to determine what happened. So I would end up in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico if the pipeline was under the Gulf of Mexico or New Mexico or Canada or wherever the pipeline would break. They'd send me out there, and I'd have to sort of do some detective work to try to figure out what the root cause of the break might be. So I'd bring samples back to the lab, have them shipped. We'd analyze it, have a meeting, write a report and that sort of thing.

DePue: I would imagine pipelines in the Gulf of Mexico, are you talking about laying on the ocean floor?

Podlasek: Ah, they lay on the floor, right. And the ones I worked on were in 160 feet of water. So there's a large number of pipelines running all through the Gulf of

Mexico, and then there's platforms that are gating platforms where they shift it around and open one valve, close another. They're valving platforms. Open and close so they can shift to gas or oil to any other different place, wherever they need it. So it's a massive thing that goes on.

DePue: A hundred and sixty feet down, is that too far for scuba divers to get down there?

Podlasek: Yeah, you have professional divers that have to go down, and they go down for a short time, and then they have to come up, and bends, and stuff like that. So yeah, for the divers it's a dangerous thing. For me, I was up top all the time, so—

DePue: You said you did that for three years, what was next?

Podlasek: Then I moved to the Illinois Commerce Commission. And that's how I ended up here in Springfield. So I was looking to change jobs, and I had a job at the Electric Power Research Institute in Palo Alto on Hillgrove Avenue, and my wife and I and daughter went out there, and we tried to buy a house. For three weeks I was working every day, and we were searching around. We simply couldn't afford a house in Palo Alto or anywhere nearby, so we decided to take the job in Springfield at the Illinois Commerce Commission, which I also had a job offer. And I had a friend, my aunt, who—you know, don't bring anybody, nobody sent. Well, somebody sent me, and so it was all right.

DePue: Yeah, Abner Mikva is the one who said that, quoted that when he was a very young politician up in Chicago and asking to help out with the Paul Douglas campaign.

Podlasek: Uh-huh.

DePue: The classic line of Illinois patronage and how it works or doesn't work.

Podlasek: Right, don't send anybody, nobody that nobody sent. (laughs)

DePue: And now maybe I'm just too curious, Bob, but I would think that you were being paid well at Battelle and that you weren't going to be making any more money necessarily working for the Illinois Commerce Commission.

Podlasek: Actually, I came out about even. So I worked for the chairman as his administrative assistant for energy issues. I had the degree in economics as well as engineering background. I worked on nuclear projects. I worked on natural gas and oil. And so I worked on a large number of projects. And then Thompson put me on the board of directors of the mid-America solar energy corporation.

DePue: This would be Governor Jim Thompson?

Podlasek: Governor Jim Thompson. And I was a member of the Midwest, a staff member of the energy taskforce of the Midwest governors' conference. So you know, the governors get together quarterly or something like that. I don't know if they still do that. I think that, you know, you can do it virtually, but in those days in the '70s, '72 to '78 or '74 to '78, we met along with the Governors. And that's when the energy crisis hit in Washington. We were trying to decide what we were going to do as a country. We were running out of nuclear fuel, and there was a huge panic that we had to get more nuclear reactor fuel and more processing plants because we were going to build nuclear parks all over Illinois and all over because the demand for electricity was growing so rapidly and the demand for electricity was correlated with economic growth and the growth of the gross national product, so by that kind of logic, we had to just continue to build all the time. And Commonwealth Edison was a leader in the country. And they were regulated by the Illinois Commerce Commission, so—

DePue: I assume now you didn't have to travel around quite as much as before. Was that one of the attractions of the job?

Podlasek: Well, actually, I traveled around quit a bit because I was representing Illinois, all these national meetings. So maybe once or twice a month I would have to travel, but I traveled to generally populated places whereas when I traveled for Battelle I was travelling in the desert and all sorts of places like that.

DePue: Well, this is all a continuation of the vagabond lifestyle that you had when you're a kid and a college student.

Podlasek: Right, right, right, and I continued it. And you know, if I had nothing to do, like I did one day in Albuquerque, I had a red eye special to Columbus, Ohio, and so I got on the bus on Central Avenue, and I just went back and forth riding on the bus talking to the people from one end of Central to the other in Albuquerque. So you know, I just hang out, take my bags and hang out somewhere, but—

DePue: How long were you with the Illinois Commerce Commission?

Podlasek: Three years.

DePue: So that takes us up to, what, '78 or beyond that time?

Podlasek: Seventy-eight, roughly. And then they were building this natural gas pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to the lower forty-eight.

DePue: They being—?

Podlasek: A company called Northwest Energy. And it was headed by John McMillian. And he was an early supporter of Jimmy Carter. So he was one of these renegade oil guys. And because he supported Carter, Carter made sure he got

the permit to build a pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to the lower forty-eight. And he had to put the project together. So there's eight hundred miles of pipeline in Alaska that went roughly parallel to the oil pipeline. And then it came across Canada to pretty close to Edmonton down to Calgary, down to the border of the lower forty-eight, and then it split off, one to the east coast and one to the west coast.

DePue: And this was natural gas pipelines?

Podlasek: Natural gas. So if you're just thinking, there's the natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany that's controversial. Because that's going to pump all this natural gas from Russia into Germany. Germany's going to pay them. That's going to subsidize the economic growth of Russia big time. And so that's why there was some pushback on that. And so Germany's effort to go green is to switch to natural gas from nuclear and coal. And they need a lot of gas. They don't have any gas, so they're buying it from Russia. The same time we're investing in NATO to protect Germany from Russia, and they're helping Russia grow. You know, the classic political issue.

DePue: You mentioned there, the reason is that they want to go green, but they're putting aside nuclear, and instead of natural gas, isn't that less green?

Podlasek: Oh yeah. There's no logic in all of this, you know. But unfortunately, they just don't understand basic rules of nature, of what's going on. But putting pipelines under the water and under North Sea and everything, that's common stuff.

DePue: At this time in your life, were you kind of casting an eye towards getting back into higher education somehow, being on a faculty someplace?

Podlasek: Well, I would always dabble a little bit, but I'd go for an interview or something. But the money wasn't there. And so I'm working for Northwest Alaska Pipeline in Salt Lake City.

DePue: Is this after the Illinois Commerce Commission then?

Podlasek: After the Illinois Commerce Commission. For three years I'm doing pure consulting. So I'm on a consulting contract. So every Monday morning they fly me to Salt Lake City, and every Thursday I fly back from Springfield.

DePue: To Springfield.

Podlasek: Yeah. And then we had an office in Calgary, and then I ended up with an office in Calgary, and then we had an office in southern California at Flour, Costa Mesa, and then we had an office in Houston. Also, we had an office in Washington.

DePue: Why wouldn't you move the family to Salt Lake City?

Podlasek: Because these things are iffy. You know, when you look at the economics of that project, it required nine dollars per million BTUs of natural gas to be sold here in the US. And there's plenty of gas available today at $2.40. So it never came near being economically viable. But at the time when there's the panic going on, we're short on gasoline, you know, we're alternating days to buy gasoline, natural gas's was available, build whatever we can. Coal gasification plants, all of these things Carter put together, none of them materialized. They were all non-economic. I mean, the technology is there, it's just not economically viable.

DePue: And driving most of this, I'm trying to recall back to those early and mid-1970s, you've got the oil embargo that the Saudis placed on the world.

Podlasek: Right, right. And that started the whole thing. You know, they were at twelve dollars a barrel, and the, I think, went up to twenty-five, and everybody went berserko. And then they threatened to limit our oil, and everybody panicked, and we didn't have enough oil. And we go through these panics on a regular basis because there's a little dislocation in the market like there is now. There's not enough semiconductor chips to make cars. You know, there's a little thing that there's always dislocations in the market, and there's always a panic. And if people just keep their cool, eventually it works its way out. It just takes time to work it out.

DePue: Okay. Did Peggy and the family enjoy their time in Springfield then, even while you're galivanting all over the place?

Podlasek: I come home on Thursday night, drive up from St. Louis, and Friday, Saturday, and Sunday I'm home. So we cook meals, and we do things. I had three children at that time, not the fourth. And it worked out pretty good. Plus, it was good money, and it was good resume building for myself, so that worked out real well. Of course, once the price of oil dropped off and the Saudis started pumping oil, the project was recognized to be non-economic. So they shut it down. So then I spent a year consulting. And then I went over to Bradley and see if they want to hire me as a professor, and they said yes, so I ended up at Bradley.

DePue: When did that happen?

Podlasek: Nineteen eighty-two.

DePue: And was Bradley able to match your financial needs by that time?

Podlasek: No, no. But by that time the financial issue wasn't an issue.

DePue: Was Peggy working?

Podlasek: She may be. I don't know. We never spend more than we earn, all the way through college, so we came out of college with money in the bank, and we're loan sharks, you know. (laughs)

DePue: What a concept, you live within your means.

Podlasek: Huh? Yeah, just make sure you spend less than you make. I was just going to point out that when I worked for Northwest Alaskan, we had Canadian partners and a lively group of Canadians in Calgary. So I spent a lot of time in Calgary. And I spent a lot of time, actually, in Banff. If I was stuck on a weekend in Calgary, I would go up to Banff because the other guys, they were, you know, kayaking down the Bow River to Caslgary.

DePue: Banth?

Podlasek: Banff, Canada, B-A-N-F-F.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: And it's in the center of the Canadian Rockies. And there's the Banff Springs Hotel, and it's one of the more picturesque parts because it's the continental divide that has moved its way up into Canada and into British Columbia.

DePue: I'm sure it's a beautiful place unless you're there in January, maybe.

Podlasek: I was there in January too, and it was not bad. (laughter) I loved it. Now, as part of that, six hundred miles north, they built a test site where we would test the pipeline and make sure it wouldn't interfere with the oil pipeline and make sure if it broke it wouldn't rupture the oil pipeline, to meet all the environmental kinds of things. So we picked the test site that was remote, where no journalists or anything would ever find it up near the Northwest Territories and where there was some natural gas. And I was sort of handling it for the American partners, and another guy was handling it for the Canadian partners. I'd have to go up there from time to time, and I always forced myself to take a business jet up there. Every time we try to take a prop plane up there it just didn't work out, so emergency landings, stuff like that. So you know, it was remote. And cold, and cold, by the way.

DePue: You mentioned, I'm assuming that this is a bit tongue and cheek, you mean so remote that the journalists wouldn't find it?

Podlasek: Right. (laughs)

DePue: You want to go into a little bit of elaboration about that comment?

Podlasek: Well, it's just that it was up seventy-five miles west of high-level Alberta. And there was an airport, one flight in, one flight out. And everybody knew

everybody, and if somebody was coming out as a journalist and didn't belong—

DePue: So what was wrong with having journalists up there, Bob?

Podlasek: Well, they might misinterpret the results of our tests. So we'd blow things up. It was big. It was a big deal. So you know, rather than have to deal with them, we just moved up to the north, and the Canadian partners, they had a love for this area around a little Indian village called Assumption, which has now got a new name. But I don't know Perhaps Chetah. It was all indigenous people except for a Catholic nun and a Canadian Mountie keep the peace. The Canadian Mountie often visited our test site for hours and I always engaged in interesting conversations. It was their territory. We agreed to wherever they wanted to do it, but they found the most remote spot in the corner of Alberta, right where Alberta, British Columbia, Yukon, and Northwest Territories come together, way up in that little thing.

DePue: And the they who are making the decision are Canadians or business managers?

Podlasek: Well, these were Canadian companies, a partnership of companies who sent one guy out to be in charge of this test site. And they were building the natural gas pipeline from the border of Alaska all the way down to the border of the lower forty-eight, the forty-ninth parallel. So they had a lot at stake. And they were selling it as economic development project for themselves. Well, we didn't come that close to the Tar Sands, but High Level wasn't too far from the tar sands, a hundred miles, two hundred miles- Fort McMurray.

DePue: Well, lets get back to your beginning days at Bradley. It sounds like you were a bit concerned about the uncertainty of this business, especially with fluctuating oil prices. Did it take much to convince them to hire you?

Podlasek: I think it was a pretty smooth thing. The department chair said we needed somebody, and you're available, and you've got the right credentials, and I was teaching the material science, because that was what I was doing for my PhD. And then I was doing the Capstone Senior Design Project, and then I was doing some computer programming for this. So I had a pretty good load. And then about two years into that the dean approached me and wanted to make me the assistant dean of the engineering college. So I accepted that. So that meant I taught half time, half time I worked on administrative issues in the dean's office.

DePue: And were you, from day one, working in the engineering department?

Podlasek: Yeah, I was always a full-time faculty member in the mechanical engineering department. So I never left my academic appointment, and assistant deans do not.

DePue: At the time, those first couple years, what were your long-term aspirations as far as being in higher education?

Podlasek: Waiting for the oil prices to go up so I could really make some big bucks.

DePue: And go back to the oil business again?

Podlasek: Yeah, I would. You know, I could go in the summer and do other things. A lot of this is cyclical. A lot of it is weather dependent kind of stuff. It just turns out that, in the area I was in, all the work was in the wintertime. And the summertime, there was no work because the muskeg is so soft you couldn't walk or anything, so all work is done in the wintertime, all the geotechnical, all the building on the test site. Everything is done in the winter because the ground is frozen and you don't sink in. But soon as you come to the summer and the spring breakup, the soil gets real soft, and you just sink, you know, a foot every time you walk through that stuff. Now, there's some high areas with a little bit of gravel but not much gravel at all.

DePue: It looks like you had your eye going back to the same company because you could have gone someplace else. There's oil all over the world.

Podlasek: Right, but each place in the world has its own unique characteristics, you know, for working, and I had skills working in the muskeg kind of thing. And Alaska's the same way, by the way. You know, that's why you had that elevated pipeline, because some of it is muskeg and freezes and thaws.

DePue: You said this term several times, musk egg?

Podlasek: Muskeg, M-U-S-K. That's a sort of an organic material that freezes in the wintertime, but then in the summertime it gets real soft, and it just, you can't drive on it. You can't walk on it. You can't do anything. When you see these videos of people in the ice roads in the arctic hauling stuff and it's cold and all the rest, they don't have a choice. They've got to do it when the ice is up. And there's no bridges up there. You got to wait until the rivers freeze.

DePue: Were you thinking, when you first started Bradley, you know, this might be my long-term career? I need to get myself on that tenure track?

Podlasek: No, no, the first two years I wasn't on a tenure track. Then I was on the tenure track. And then I moved on to the administrative thing, and then I applied for tenure and got it. And then I had started to do some summer work at Kennedy Space Center at NASA, to write some books and stuff like that and papers and do some papers, which I did. The other thing I did is got involved in robotics because my master's degree was in instrumentation and control, mechanical engineering, and it fit the whole evolution of the robot business that was coming up.

DePue: What does it mean to be on a tenure track?

Podlasek: That means that you have a temporary contract every year.

DePue: If you're not.

Podlasek: For seven years. You know, in April they give you a contract for another year, another year. Once you receive tenure, then you become a permanent employee. And the rules to get rid of you, according to the faculty handbook, get real tight. The only way they can get rid of you, I think, if you have sex with the president's daughter or (laughter) financial exigency.

DePue: Okay. And then you become, what, an assistant or associate professor?

Podlasek: I became an associate professor.

DePue: Is that the bottom rung of professorates?

Podlasek: Tenured professors. The bottom rung is assistant.

DePue: So that's the untenured?

Podlasek: Untenured.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: And then there's the associate. And it's about fifty-fifty at Bradley. Fifty percent of them are associates, and 50 percent are full professor, maybe less. Maybe 40, I don't know. So to get a full professor you would have to do enormous amount of research and get publications in all sorts of journals and everything. People submit huge books full of papers and everything. The problem is that you have to spend a lot of time at that, and my time was being spent administratively. That's number one. And number two, when you're doing administrative work, sometimes you have to be Mr. No, and you know, people get a little upset about decisions that are made and all sorts of things. So you got to go through all these committees, is my bottom line. So you get stuck pretty quick.

DePue: You're the assistant dean for the engineering department?

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: Okay, and so does that mean you're spending most of your time working with other faculty or with student issues or a mixture of both?

Podlasek: Whatever, a mixture of both, because the dean says, "Here, we've got an issue here. We've got a new project here, new initiatives," all sorts of things. If the college wants to get involved in something that's cross-disciplinary, then the assistant dean gets involved and tries to execute it. So for example, in year 2000 or 1999, Bradley signed a joint agreement with the Fraunhofer Institute

in Dresden, Germany, IWS, for lasers and beam technology to do physical vapor deposition coatings in Peoria with the hope that this group would be a subcontractor to Caterpillar. Caterpillar was behind this also. I was the co-director of that project for three years. My lab was in Dresden, Germany, but I was in Peoria. And so that would be an assistant dean project, but there were lots of others, the graduate school and making changes to the graduate program, or it could be just undergraduate issues. It could be any number of administrative issues that come up. The current associate dean, Julie Reyer, she's in charge of the new building that they're putting in. So she's got her hands full. I worked for seven deans as assistant dean. I've got the record.

DePue: And from what you're indicating, you tell me if I'm off base here, there are opportunities as assistant dean to upset some people?

Podlasek: There are always opportunities at the university to upset people, but when you're an administrative position and departments are competing with each other and, for example, I was the liaison for freshman enrollment, and people would say, "Well, you're swaying too many students to go into that department and not this department," and that. I happened to be in the mechanical engineering department, which had 40 percent of the freshman or 50 percent of the freshman. All the other departments get little bit upset because we should get more of these students. And so there's always allegations. We should teach this course. You shouldn't be teaching this. And you'd have to do some research and figure out, now, I think the politics are so vicious because there's so little at stake, and they deny there's politics. My department chair denied. There's no politics at the university. (laughter)

DePue: You obviously don't agree with that.

Podlasek: I just let it go. (laughter)

DePue: I'm assuming that you got a pay increase because you're assistant dean, that that's rewarded that way.

Podlasek: A little bit, not much. It was similar. I was not the guy that was beating on the dean's door for pay increases all the time. I really wasn't even beating for title, you know. I just came in and did my job and had fun doing it. And one of the other things I did was to interact with the rest of the campus, a lot of committees, a lot of things. I would go to lunch with the faculty from the campus, ten or fifteen people for twenty-five years. We just sit and trade ideas and trade thoughts and that sort of thing. That's where I learned a lot about the rest of the campus.

DePue: It sounds like you were eager to do those kinds of things.

Podlasek: Yeah, I always was. You know, that wasn't, for most engineering faculty, they just don't want to deal with them, you know. And having worked for the

commerce commission, I knew what it was like to sit in a meeting that was all just BS and try to make some sense of the BS, you know.

DePue: When you were first hired, was it to your advantage that you had, let's call it, real-world experience?

Podlasek: Yeah, there's a few people they hired had real world experience, but it was my real-world experience that really helped me get the assistant dean's job too because they wanted me to interact with industry. I was the liaison for Caterpillar for a long time, liaison with John Deere. Certainly, the tech center for Caterpillar I was the liaison for many years. I started up a program where students would be interns during the semester, working for big bucks. They're now making twenty dollars to twenty-eight dollars an hour part-time working at Caterpillar, and I would recruit students, woodshed them a little bit, and then send them over to Caterpillar and they'd select which ones they wanted to work. And not all students are really ready to work in a competitive environment where they had to provide value every day. And there are a lot of students—not a lot, but some of them say, "Well, I don't want to work before 11:00. That's when I get up in the morning." Well, I say, this is not for you. So I have to be the guy to say, "I want this money. I need this money desperately, but I won't get up until 11:00." And they start at 7:00. And some of them, you know, they were at a era where cellphones had to be in your car. That caused some grief.

DePue: What I want to do next for a while here, as we talk about your experiences, is focus on those early years. You started in '82, is that correct?

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: So let's take it up through most of the '80s, if we can.

Podlasek: Okay.

DePue: And the first question is, I'm taking a snapshot of these various aspects, the faculty during those years, how would you rate the faculty that you were working with? How would you describe them?

Podlasek: They were the same faculty that I had dealt with at the U of I in the '70s or early '70s and '60s. They were totally committed to helping the students get skills, cognitive and emotional skills so they could advance themselves when they left the university. So they could qualify for a reasonably good job and that sort of thing. The content of the courses and everything were driven by the fact that—how is this going to help these students advance? Not all students are going to take every one of those skills, but at least they would have an array of skills that they could market themselves. And one of the things that happened was a Capstone Senior Design Project where they had to work on a real-world problem, a team of three or four people with a mentor at some organization. And that helped them really understand the transition

between the theory in academia and the practical stuff in the real world. Since I had done all of that, it was an easy case for me to do that. So I played a pivotal role in these capstone design projects. I started some, I can't remember when, with Walt Disney World down in Orlando. The students didn't have to do their project in Peoria or around, although a lot were at Caterpillar and John Deere and around. We would travel to Orlando and do projects, backburner projects for Walt Disney World. Did twenty-two of those. So the students got firsthand experience working in the real world. And so that was a little more dramatic because the shock the students experienced when they went behind the scenes at Walt Disney World was overwhelming.

DePue: I'm trying to imagine what kind of projects you would work on at Walt Disney World. I assume that these were connected with new exhibits that were being developed?

Podlasek: Well, new exhibits or exhibits that were having problems.

DePue: Technical problems.

Podlasek: Technical problems. So it could be a robotic arm at the American Adventure. It could be tracking animals in Animal Kingdom. It could be problems with Runoff Rapids where the boats or the innertubes were too difficult for the people to get. It could be, actually, we did some things for one of the Superbowl parades. You know, some little aspect of it. Splash Mountain, for example, the boats were running into each other, and they were dinging up the backs of the boats. They were supposedly a log, but they're a boat. And so we had to redesign the back of the boat so that the boat, when it did crash, it didn't—

DePue: And you said at this time in the university environment, the faculty was dedicated to teaching the skills that the students would need. And I wonder, without getting too technical, what kind of skills were you trying to imbue in the students?

Podlasek: If you take the cognitive skills and subtract the emotional skills, the business skills but the cognitive skills would be, I've got the spacecraft going up. How much thrust do I need? Do calculations for aircraft, for example. How do we make this control system? How do we make this autopilot? How do I work on a team to designing autopilots for this aircraft? How do I work on a team that's working on the structural components of an airport? Now, in Caterpillar there's gazillions of things, engine design, engine issues, less pollutants, making things last longer. Caterpillar sells premium as price because their reliability is the highest. So if you're running some equipment in a mine in Colombia or Perth—there's nothing in Perth, outside of Perth, Australia, you have a problem, you've got a problem because it's so far away from everything.

DePue: It sounds like your basic problem-solving skills.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: And analyzing problems.

Podlasek: You're analyzing problems and finding new solutions. So a lot of those new solutions involve mathematical equations. So when I started with the first example, you know, how much thrust do I need to get my spacecraft to line up and couple with the space station and stuff like that, those are standard things. If you were making a rover, for example, for Venus—we did one of these not too long ago—where the temperature's 750 degrees, how do we make this whole thing work? How do we know what the wind velocity is on Venus? You got to figure out. The Russians are the only ones that have dropped a satellite to the surface of Venus, and that may have a little wind data. Could you have a wind turbine with an umbilical cord driving this thing around in this hot weather? It involves materials. It involves electronics. It involves design, and in design it involves weight critical, it involves not using semi-conductors because they would melt—all that stuff.

DePue: Well, I didn't anticipate to go this deeply into it, even though my curiosity led me there. You know, my background was in humanities. We were solving different kind of problems than the engineering students were.

Podlasek: Right, right.

DePue: Let's turn out attention then to the students because we've been kind of hitting around with that for quite a while. What was the size of the student body at Bradley when you first got there?

Podlasek: It was about six thousand undergraduates, now about four thousand undergraduates—well, maybe fifty-five hundred undergraduates and about four thousand undergraduates now. It's been steadily declining over twenty years or so. Not a big deal because you adjust, and it's not—

DePue: How about the graduate level?

Podlasek: That fluctuates enormously. Our graduate students in engineering, because that's where I was—

DePue: Now, again this is in the '80s I'm focusing in on.

Podlasek: On the '80s, yeah. We had very few graduate students. A few Caterpillar engineers with a bachelor's degree were coming on, but we had very few graduate students at that time. We were primarily an undergraduate educational operation, like Carbondale, like Northern. They have a smattering of graduate students, but by and large you don't have too many.

DePue: And number of women who were enrolled, especially in your department?

Podlasek: Well, starting off, not too many, maybe one or two per class. And then it's sort of grown to about ten, fifteen per class.

DePue: What do you mean per class, in a classroom environment or—?

Podlasek: Yeah, well, let me give you a different number. It's about 12 to 15 percent of the student body would be female, and it was probably 6 percent.

DePue: Okay, at the time when you started.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: How about the quality of the students you were getting?

Podlasek: Most of the students we were getting at that time were from smaller towns in Illinois, farm people. They had enormous fire in their belly and willing to learn. So they may have worked on farm equipment, but they never understood the underlying principles to make something better. Combines get better and stuff which is going like that. And all the new technology that's out there that's not been offered yet, like Deere purchased a Silicon Valley company called Blue River going to get rid of all the herbicides and pesticides. They are going to have these little eight-row machines with little robot arms and vision systems. They're going to go pick the weeds right out as they drive down the field thereby eliminating the use any herbicide.

DePue: I have to figure out how to kill all those pesky bugs that are in the air then too that way.

Podlasek: Well, the bugs might be part of the weeds, but some of those, the spray is a little different. Drones could do that. I've got solutions for that too, by the way.

DePue: How about the percentage of minority students when you first started?

Podlasek: Pretty close to zero. But that reflected the high school college ready population in Illinois. Almost all the undergraduate candidates we received was driven by the K-through-twelve program in Illinois. So if the high school advisors are not telling females, saying that females, that college and engineering is not for you, that was driving what students we were getting. I mean, we were too far down the pipeline to—people had to get into pipeline early on. And of course, I was a head of the parents at the Math and Science Academy and on a search committee, so I can talk about that later in the '90s when I was working with the Illinois Math and Science Academy.

DePue: Now, I got to the University of Iowa in 1981. So this is same timeframe. I'm at the graduate level University of Iowa. I was astounded by the number of

foreign students who were there at that time. Was that a factor? Was that going on at University of Bradley? Should be Bradley University, right?

Podlasek: Yeah, in the ’80s not so much but then all of a sudden it picked up. But if you’re looking at the timeframe, 1980, roughly, to 1990, there wasn’t very many international students because Bradley was not a graduate program, number one. Number two, Bradley did not have the assistantships for these students like in physics, chemistry, and engineering, engineering particularly. Every student got an assistantship like myself, and that gave the international student a source of income as required for his F-1 visa. So that worked out pretty well. So the F-1 visa has gone through all sorts of iterations.

DePue: The F-1 visa is for students, international students. I think in ’86 Mr. al-Marri graduated from Bradley. Speaking of international students, he was from Saudi Arabia. He graduated in 1986 in business and then went back to Saudi Arabia and that sort of thing. I’ll talk about al-Marri in a little bit, but he’s one of our most famous graduate students.

DePue: Was Bradley University affordable when you were going there when you first started working there?

Podlasek: For students?

DePue: Yes.

Podlasek: The way that works is that there’s tuition discount rates. So if a student had a good ACT, SAT score, we would give them a reduction in tuition. So in all private schools there’s the sticker price and there’s the average price of what the average student pays for tuition. So at that time it was probably 30 percent. I’m just making a guess. That means the discount rate was 30 percent. So if your tuition is $30,000 a year, 30 percent of that is roughly, what, $9000? So you would discount on the average $10,000 for everybody’s tuition, and then you’d pay full room and board. So some students would get 100 percent discount, like athletes. Some people would get less. Somebody who was a National Merit finalist would get 100 percent tuition discount. So you would use discounts it to shape your enrollment. For decades, tuition discount rates were based on merit. For graduate students, we didn’t offer any scholarships or assistantships until the second or third semester. And that presented problems because the international F-1 students needed some source of money to show on their F-1visa application, and most of them, because they were poor. So that didn’t work out very well. That’s why Bradley didn’t get many graduate students. At Bradley there was fight after fight about who gets the assistantships, in mechanical engineering were three. The dollar amount was peanuts compared to other schools but so there’s always a contentious issue about the cost of the graduate students.

DePue: When you first got there, I'm wondering if you can reflect on the quality of the facilities at the campus and were the 1980s years that you saw a lot of construction and expansion going on?

Podlasek: There was some expansion and construction, but there was really not enough money to upgrade the facilities like a public university where you have the capital development board coming in and then putting up new buildings.

DePue: Capital development board being state money?

Podlasek: State money. But that sort of changed now because there's a lot of new Bradley buildings that the university has built , and the board of trustees wants to build new buildings. The only problem is they don't have the money. So that causes them a little heartburn and requires loans for which the endowment is used as collateral. While the endowment looks healthy, only a small portion is available for deficit spending due to the covenants associated with the bonds.

DePue: So they changed the scale of the buildings, or they go into debt?

Podlasek: Well, they went into debt, and they used the endowment as collateral for the debt. But then they have to pay that off. So each year, you know, the cost of doing business goes up dramatically because you got this debt payment that you have to pay.

DePue: Using the endowment to pay off the debt, is that endowment is what alumni have given to the university over the years?

Podlasek: Yeah, there's three parts to the endowment. One is restricted funds where somebody gives money for a laboratory or something like that, and I had that from Emerson for my robotics laboratory. We would set money aside in the endowment. We'd get income from it every year hoping nobody would sweep the funds. You know what that term means. (laughs)

DePue: Yes. It's a tried and true principle in Illinois government.

Podlasek: Well, and since I was from Springfield and my wife was CPA working for the state, if there was any hint at Bradley of somebody sweeping the funds, I would kick up a fuss like you couldn't believe. (laughs) I mean, that was part of my job, kicking up a fuss. We had a robotics lab which I built and taught in and everything and then turned it over to other people. But some of that is restricted funds. Some of the money is unrestricted funds. University can do whatever they want. And some of the money is just sort of loose cash. The unrestricted funds are used as collateral for the buildings, for the loans for the buildings. The endowment is about 350—well, now with the stock market it's probably up 380, 390 million dollars, maybe more. So the endowment, that half of it is roughly restricted. Almost half is covered as collateral for new buildings that we've built, and there's a little bit of cashflow. If you spend

more than you take in, then you can tap into this fund. My guess is that we've tapped into that extra money already. But that extra money has grown because the stock market has grown. The cash crunch that the universities were facing back in April of last year is sort of got to mitigate. It's over for a while.

DePue: Until the next turn of the economy.

Podlasek: Right. If that stock market goes down to twenty-five hundred, you're going to see a lot of renegotiation of loans by the universities. And now every time they renegotiate the loan and have less collateral, the interest rate goes up, so your operating expense goes up.

DePue: During the late '60s and early '70s when you were a student yourself, there was a lot of turmoil going on in colleges and universities. I think you would agree with that.

Podlasek: Oh yeah.

DePue: How about the 1980s?

Podlasek: Not that I can remember, just nothing stuck to me that any—you know, I'm back to the students loved America. They wanted to work. They wanted to go to school, get some skills, and get a job. And they weren't contrarians. They were happy in the United States, and to a certain extent in the '90s. And then, you know, Vietnam wore off and more and more students began to love America, you know. There was a group of students in the '60s that burned flags and all the rest of that, and they just didn't love America. But more and more that all changed and everything seemed pretty good.

DePue: Was athletics on campus an important thing for the students?

Podlasek: Not that much. They did participate, and they'd go to basketball games and stuff like that, but students who were the athletes it was important. It was something big.

DePue: Did Bradley have a football team?

Podlasek: In the '60s, early '60s, before I came. But the athletics, all I can say is right now they're running a pretty good deficit, fifteen million something. Almost all schools are running a deficit in athletics except for Alabama, Notre Dame, and a couple people like that, Duke.

DePue: Did Bradley have fraternities and sororities?

Podlasek: Yeah, they had a large number of fraternities and sororities, which were a powerful group on campus. And they were known for their parties. And so that was one of the attractions early on for Bradley is because it was a party school.

DePue: (laughs) An attraction for the students, maybe not for the parents.

Podlasek: Well, the parents had to know, and they couldn't be that dumb.

DePue: Well, this is only a few years beyond when *Animal House* was released, if you remember that movie.

Podlasek: Yeah, they got to be paying attention. Right now, you know, talking to people, they're on top of what their students are doing in college. They're calling them every week, and what's your next courses, and how are you doing? And I do that with my grandkids too to see they don't fall behind, you know. Because it's expensive when you fall behind.

DePue: This next question is right down the strike zone for you, Bob. The impact of computer technology that you saw in that decade, what was going on as far as university life, the student life, the faculty life because of this revolution in computer technology?

Podlasek: The engineering faculty were always picking up on the computer technology. So when I started in 1962 at Illinois writing computer programs in machine language and Fortran, I was pretty much at the cutting edge of all of that. And there was no word processors or anything, but we were solving problems with computers, same with my PhD thesis. I did a lot of work with the computer programs. They were all punch cards, and if you tripped with your hand truck full of punch cards, they all got out of order—(laughter) so you know, it was the IBM 360, which was a room big as this whole third floor here, at least, air conditioned. And there was this cadre of people who could debug your program like, I don't know how. They could drill down into the computer using hexadecimal numbers, adding and subtracting and everything, and find the bug in your program and everything else. And I was always amazed. I tried to learn as much as I could, and then starting in the '70s we were using a little more computers and that sort of thing. When I got to Bradley the electrical engineering department had a PDP-11 dedicated to their classes. And we had some computers on campus also. So we were starting, and soon as I started I was teaching Fortran. I had to teach some computer programming. Formula translation is the name of Fortran, and so it was a engineering kind of software. And then they shifted over to C programming.

DePue: Were the students able to come to tests with their calculator in hand?

Podlasek: If they weren't programmable calculators, yeah. We always had a particular calculator they could use. But when I started it was a slide rule, but they had a calculator they could use, but now with the smart phone and everything, you can access the solutions to any problem during the test on your smart phone.

DePue: Which I would think that they can't bring their cell phones with them.

Podlasek: Well, they have to put them in front of their desk or something. But every once in a while, a student will somehow find a test the problem and solution on the Internet and come back with the answer verbatim. And so one time I put a problem on a test, and I copied it from another book which had different units and all the constants and everything that were needed to solve the problem I didn't provide, nevertheless the student came up with the exact answer verbatim from the book. He was the only one out of forty or fifty people that was able to do that, but he said he didn't cheat.

DePue: In this case I'm going to jump ahead to the '90s for this question, and that's the impact that the Internet had on students' life, on education.

Podlasek: Yeah, huge. Just because now you don't need a library. Now everything is accessible except you don't know the veracity of the information. In the 60s, I would hang out in the library all the time at the U of I particularly the stacks the Russian library to read stuff. I would just serendipitously wander around trying to find something. But you can do that on the Internet now. You start off on one point, and you end up somewhere else, at least I do. And so you can learn a lot. You can follow a lot. You can, if you work hard, fact check most things. It's an enormous source. Organizing your knowledge and being able to turn it into useful wisdom becomes the difficulty because you have data, information, knowledge, and wisdom. And you know, you can have the data, ones and zeroes and stuff, but then you have the translate the information to knowledge, and then you have to turn it into wisdom to solve useful problems in unique ways. That's where the trick comes in. And sometimes you just have to look at it from a different perspective and not the perspective of a screen or virtual reality glasses. In general, it's very positive, but it does not help people solve complex problems with a lot of checking. And the perfect example is the Boeing 738 Max problem.

DePue: Well, that goes back to what faculty were wanting to teach kids back in the early '80s and those skills, problem solving skills. You're saying that the Internet has eroded that?

Podlasek: Well, for some students it has. For others, it hasn't. You can teach courses on the Internet and topics, little packets of knowledge, and the students can accumulate a whole bunch of packets of knowledge, but can you integrate that altogether into some wisdom to solve a problem? So I don't know if you've been on Khan Academy, which is my favorite. You get packets of knowledge, you know, in eight to ten minutes. And you go through it. He does a great job. You think about it a little bit and let it incubate, and then move on to the next level and the next level and the next level. There's been, you know, a real advantage to getting nuggets of knowledge in packets of knowledge, but how do you solve a problem with just packets of knowledge? So pick a problem. How much money do we give NATO? How much should we give NATO? Why are we giving money to NATO? What's the purpose of that money? My

sense is to protect European Union or Europeans from the Russians. Then Germany goes and jacks up the Russian economy. Something's not right.

DePue: When you say jacks up the Russian's economy by buying natural—

Podlasek: By buying all that natural gas. That's all revenue. I mean, that is just like Saudi Arabia. You're buying. It's just like buying corn or soybeans from United States by China.

DePue: Khan Academy, how do you spell Khan?

Podlasek: K-H-A-N.

DePue: Okay, that's what I thought.

Podlasek: Salman Khan. Interesting story guy.

DePue: Okay. Moving on here, it sounds like you're not just interacting with other parts of the university, Bradley, with all these other departments, were you also branching out and checking out what's going on in other colleges and universities around the country?

Podlasek: I was on numerous groups, the Kern Family Foundation. I was a consultant to that group where they were trying to promote entrepreneurial thinking amongst midsized schools. Bob Kern had $320 million endowment that he had to get rid of in twenty years. Robert Kern set up the Generac, the back up generator company. And he was getting old. And all of a sudden, a tornado or hurricane hit Florida, and everybody wanted a backup generator, and his company became worth a gazillion dollars. And some investors purchased it from him, and he's living off that money, built a beautiful place up in Waukesha, Wisconsin, and Bradley got some of that money. But you know, I work with those kinds of people. I go to the engineering conferences across the country. Every year I was going to a I couple of conferences. I would interact with faculty from all over the country. I was doing Chautauqua summer courses, and there I would go to a course where I didn't belong and see how much I could learn. For example, I went to Duke and took a psychology course in cognitive psychology or cognitive learning. Or I went to University of North Carolina at Asheville, took two weeks to learn how to be a system administrator for Unix, which I didn't use, but I learned a little bit about Unix. Or I went to Berkeley for three weeks to take a course in control theory. I went to Stanford, took a whole bunch of courses up in the mountains at Fallen Leaf Lake South and above Lake Tahoe and on campus.

DePue: Were what you were seeing in these other locations paralleling what was going on in Bradley in terms of the nature of academics and the trends that are going on in higher—

Podlasek: We were about four or five years behind. And being at the cutting-edge doesn't necessarily mean the best thing because you're at the bleeding edge also. And if you've got a lot of government grants to cover the bleeding edge, that's all right. Bradley does not have government grants.

DePue: Describe for me a little bit more what you mean by the bleeding edge.

Podlasek: So that means you're out trying the newest and craziest ideas, that may not materialize. They may be just a part of a hype cycle that something's out there.

DePue: The ideas you're talking about are new engineering and mathematical situations or—?

Podlasek: Oh yeah, I mean, it covers the whole waterfront. Could be fusion research. It could be fuel cells. I've had some conversations in this last week on fusion and fuel cells. Global warming's one, you know. Global cooling was the big deal in the '70s, and then all of a sudden global warming got traction, and once they got funding, baby, they're off.

DePue: Does that mean you're skeptical some of the claims that are being made?

Podlasek: Well, they're using the worst-case scenarios to scare people. And most of the projections that have been made have never come true. And does the climate change? Absolutely. It's been changing for 600 million years. We've got plots of the changing in temperature. So we know it's always changing. This area used to be a glacier.

DePue: I'm glad it's not.

Podlasek: I'm glad it's not, and it's retrieving, so you know, things change all the time.

DePue: Well, speaking of change, I think this is a perfect segue, I think, to go into the next segment which talks about the cultural climate and some of the things that you're seeing going on at the university again, still in the 1980s. And I could be wrong, but my understanding is this is kind of the early stage of what we now call politically correct speech.

Podlasek: Yeah, you know, that was coming on, but it wasn't very dominant in engineering. Now, engineering speak is so different than the rest of the university that, we would be ten years behind in political correctness in engineering. Some of the words we use would scare people right away, but they're just normal engineering terms. Like entropy.

DePue: Can you think of any examples?

Podlasek: No, not at the moment, I was just, as I made that sentence, I was trying to think, but I'll come up with some things. Oh, and female and male ends of things. The words would put a political correct person into orbit.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: Huh?

DePue: Yeah, for electrical outlets and electrical plugs.

Podlasek: And plumbing too. And, huh, take that female end and put it in that male end.

DePue: Completely different understanding for a plumber or an electrician.

Podlasek: Right. Well, not only in engineering too, I mean, a male thread should look like this.

DePue: I wonder then, we've been trying to keep the focus on 1980, so the next question is take us from the 1980s all the way up to early 2000, 2010s, the evolution that you saw that was going on in the colleges. And I guess it's probably best to kind of take this question by question as well, and I'm sure you'll go off in tangents because, in laying out this, it's difficult in these thematic approaches to do this. Let's start with this: what did you see as the driving factors for change during those many years that we're talking about, thirty-five, forty years?

Podlasek: For a long time the students were constant. So that wasn't driving force for change. The companies that hired our students, they were getting a little more cost-conscious, should I say. And they were demanding students had certain skills, coming from the university. So we were always altering our programs, Finite element analysis is a good example, to make sure the students had a good skillset in that area. If it was a new skill that came out, the older engineers didn't have it, so they'd hire the new people to do the finite element analysis. Finite element is a method of stress analysis and thermal analysis. So that turned out to be a big transition in engineering. The students were learning sort of the cutting-edge techniques. So in that sense—in a political sense the students weren't changing at all. There was never even a thought of a political anything. And even to this day most faculty in engineering, political faculty, have little interest in any politics at all.

DePue: The engineering faculty?

Podlasek: Engineering faculty. But then, as we started having all these lunches with the rest of the faculty on campus, they were getting more politically sensitive but not really aggressive, you know. If you said, "What about socialism?" They'd say, "Well, what's wrong with socialism? Tell me what's wrong with socialism?" Or they would say something like Sweden versus Venezuela versus Argentina versus East Germany or something. I mean, one person

would say Sweden. The other person would say Venezuela verse Argentina or East Germany or World War II. Most of that stuff that happened in '30s, you know with Hitler and the Russians and the socialism of Russia and the Gosplan and the planned economy and all of that, that was totally lost to most engineering faculty. They had no idea. I happened to used to take comparative economic systems, so I was aware of all of this when I got my degree of economics, but the faculty had no interest in it.

DePue: Yeah, well, I'm thinking, why would it even matter for an engineering faculty about that?

Podlasek: Well, it should have mattered because the engineers in Russia were getting paid peanuts. Engineers in the United States were getting paid big bucks because they were able to look at old problems and come up with new, cost-effective, high-value solutions.

DePue: So one of the changes you're talking about is the customers, the companies that were hoping to get skilled, good-quality students that come in and work for them.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: How about the changes that you saw during that timeframe, faculty versus administration?

Podlasek: The administration went along with the faculty. Jerry Abegg was the president of Bradley, and John Hitt was the provost who went down to central Florida and grew that university. He was a creative guy. And so they generally went along. You know, you have all these committees. You vote on courses and everything. There were no controversies. Took two years to get a new course. But relatively, if you schmoozed enough, everything worked out.

DePue: Was there a growth in the number of administrators versus the number of faculty?

Podlasek: Generally not. And now they're redefined administrators, or who isn't an administrator? The number of employees that are teaching students continues to decline, and the number of employees of the university continues to increase.

DePue: Well, it sounds like you just contradicted yourself.

Podlasek: Yeah.

DePue: You're saying that the percentage of administrators versus faculty has been increasing over the last forty years?

Podlasek: Well, they don't call them administrators.

DePue: Who's they?

Podlasek: The administrators. (laughter) You get the drift?

DePue: I'm assuming that as a faculty member and an administrator you don't necessarily agree with those—

Podlasek: I'm caught in the middle. So usually what happened is the number of administrators stayed constant, and we increased the number of faculty teaching courses who had classroom contact. But now what's happening is the number of people who have classroom content or contact is going down. Class size is going up. Now faculty have to teach four courses instead of three courses or two courses. So that's going up, and they're tightening the definition of what's teaching, but the number of employees continues to increase or at least stay—total employees of the universities continues to increase a little bit or go down.

DePue: What's driving that increase for the administrators?

Podlasek: Probably what's driving the increase in the employees. They wouldn't call them administrators because their flow charts show them. But it's student services. It's all of the coaches that you have to help people learn. All of the people who have to help the students adjust when their feelings get hurt because somebody has said something politically incorrect. You have to deal with students and faculty who get upset over the smallest little thing. In the past, people wouldn't get mad they weren't victims. Everybody's a victim now. And so somebody has to deal with these victims. So every little group that has a grievance runs to the president. President sets up a special committee to try to adjudicate their problem.

DePue: Was that something that was gradual over time, or is that something that has really accelerated in the last five or ten—

Podlasek: It's accelerating. It's an exponential growth in this area. Now, having said that, when I was an undergraduate I belonged to committees to graduate school committee association, but we didn't cause the administrative grief that those other University people did.

DePue: So again, during that thirty-five-, forty-year window we're looking at, how was the student body changing, the students themselves? Let's start with this: was their increasing number of minorities?

Podlasek: At Bradley we're a private school, so we're $36,000, $34,000 tuition. There is a small group of minorities that can afford that tuition, but if you go to eastern or western or southern, the number of minorities is probably near 40 percent. And so, yes, there's an increase in minorities, dramatic increase. But schools like Bradley and other private schools don't have that same kind of increase in minorities because the tuition is too high. So in order for that minority person

to come, you're going to have to discount tuition to a very low level, say give them almost a free ride. Then your operating revenue declines, and then you're going to have to bring in another student who's paying near full tuition or full sticker price in order to compensate so you're at 30 percent net tuition revenue. So the now the discount rate's gone up to about 50, 55 percent and perhaps higher. And this year coming up the word is the discount rate's going up again.

DePue: Was there an increase over time or a difference over time the percentage of male versus female students?

Podlasek: I think that's always been pretty much the same. It's always been about 3 percent or 2 percent more females on campus. That's because of education, nursing, some of the journalism. And the hard scientists, hard sciences generally have more males. Biology, I think, is pretty much even now. Physical therapy is probably got more females in it. Started off with more females, but more females. Business is about, I'm saying, 40 percent females, engineering 15 percent females.

DePue: So there has been an increase but it's still, in engineering at least, overwhelmingly male students?

Podlasek: Right, right. If the parent is an engineer and works with the son or daughter, the chances of that student becoming an engineer is a lot higher than if it's not. So if the parent is a farmer and has his son working on stuff, driving the tractor and harvesting and planting and everything, the chances of that student becoming a farmer or becoming an engineer is higher, although some females have good wood working skills, good electrical skills. They're accountants or something, you know. Like my wife, she's doing carpentry work now, you know, and she's really good at it. Electrical work, she's pretty good at it. She grew up on a farm. But you know, other people who don't have a background , it just doesn't work. If your family is multilingual at home, they speak couple of different languages, chances are you would pick up Spanish and French and other languages a lot quicker than if you had 100 percent English. So a lot of it is back to K through twelve. I mean, it depends how these students grew up.

DePue: Let's talk about the foreign students. I'm guessing that the percentage of foreign students increased, and I wonder, if that is the case, how well prepared were they when they got to Bradley University?

Podlasek: Well, Bradley wants foreign students. Bradley does not have the wherewithal to pay then $18- or $25,000 a year for a half-time assistantship like the University of Illinois or Stanford or someone else. The students that apply to Bradley, come from the lesser schools in India, plus primarily Pakistan, Sudan. We get very good students from Sudan, from the top school because we have a professor from Sudan who goes there and recruits them. We have a

professor who went to India all the time and recruited students in mechanical engineering too. So we would get the students, but they would have to come up with money to do it. So the way it seems to me is that they were able to put the assets of some uncle or aunt on their F-1 form because they all hire consultants to fill out the forms, and they were able to slip through for a while. Then Trump came in and said, well, we're going to follow the letter and spirit of the law. And then they started not coming. So the enrollment, we've gone from 135 international graduate students down to about eight in mechanical engineering. So, we've had a tremendous decline.

DePue: Does that mean that the move that the Trump administration made would be something you would disagree with?

Podlasek: Well, from a Bradley point of view, it was bad. But in terms of following the law, they were violating the law. They would come here and then work at a restaurant or something, all of which is not under the law acceptable. So you can only work on campus. And those campus jobs pay peanuts. These students would come and work in different places in town and then make more money. But all of that off-campus work was not allowable. But they can work. If a company's willing to hire them at a competitive wage, they can work so that they can find a job. And they network like mad to be able to find a job. At big schools, the assistantships are more than adequate to cover all living expenses and tuitions unlike Bradley.

DePue: Do you find a lot of those foreign students want to stay in the United States and are successful to stay in the US?

Podlasek: Everybody at Bradley has a different estimate, but the most common estimate is 90 percent.

DePue: Stay?

Podlasek: Stay. So if you talk to chairman electrical engineering or anybody like that, you know.

DePue: You mean there's an awful lot of foreign faculty now?

Podlasek: Yeah, right. But it's because the pay is low and because the university will go to bat to try to get a H visa, there's a little loophole in the visa thing for a green card for people who teach at universities, just like there's a big loophole for people who play baseball.

DePue: (laughs) Bigger loophole than for those who are picking strawberries?

Podlasek: Definitely. (laughs) Now, the FBI has always been on this case. They've come to Springfield and interviewed me. Two of them showed in my dining room, same place you did. (laughs)

DePue: And say what?

Podlasek: They showed up in my dining room just like you did to try to get a handle on this.

DePue: Okay. Has the faculty's relationship to the students changed over time?

Podlasek: It's changing rapidly. And there's really pressure to be student-centered. So the faculty and students are working together more, however, in the senior year when we do this Capstone Senior Design Project and there's four students per faculty member per project, every week you meet for an hour or two with the faculty member. And then there's a class meeting, so there's a lot of interaction with faculty toward the end of the program when the students now have enough skills, you can take them off to a place to solve a problem, and you can work with them. And so usually what happens is the students come to your office or another conference room once a week to review what they're doing and make goals for the next week and everything, almost like a real-life problem where they keep track of the things. Then the second time, week, they have to make a call, conference call or a video call to the sponsor and review what they're doing, how they've met their goals and objectives. And most of these companies have goals and objectives for every week for everybody, and these mentors push the same process on the students. So they have to hustle all the time to do it because it's a real-world experience. More importantly, the students have to demonstrate they are providing value to the company that is financing the capstone senior design project. And often then they have to come up with some kind of a physical widget. The fourth year in engineering there's no question about real-world experience. There's enormous amount of time spent making sure students have the skills to succeed in the real world, and Bradley does this a lot with student's projects and internships. The difference is do you get paid or not? At Caterpillar I've set up this intern program. The students are working in the culture doing things, providing value every day, but they're getting twenty dollars to twenty-eight dollars an hour for part-time work. That's not bad. However, the students must provide about $40 worth of value every hour.

DePue: Are you saying this change that's going on in the faculty-student relationship then is a very positive thing?

Podlasek: Oh yeah, I think so. But what's the unintended consequence? Faculty have less time to do their research, or they have less time to spend with their family because they've got to do their research in order to publish, in order to get promoted to full professor or to build a resume so that they can go on to another job at a university in a more lucrative part of the country.

DePue: Do you find a lot of faculty at Bradley are keeping their eye open to go to one of the higher rated universities around the country?

Podlasek: I think they are, but some of them are just place bound. Their husband might be a doctor at the medical school. They may have family around. I was trying to just take some examples. Usually, people who come after a couple of years, they sort of get stuck in a town like I'm stuck in Springfield. And I put this big matrix together of all the places I want to move to and rated all and look at all the characteristics and then say, eh, no, let's just stay here. (laughs)

DePue: You're that stage of your life.

Podlasek: Yeah, that stage of the life, so much junk, two farms, you know, all that stuff. Soon as you move away, whenever there's a crisis, you got a long way to go when you diversify it into everything.

DePue: How about the financial situation that universities and Bradley in particular have gone through during this timeframe? Has that equation changed? And part of that is tuition, but the rest of the financial situation as well.

Podlasek: Yeah, since I was on the university senate for years I sort of pay attention to that. And we have faculty who pay attention, but basically there's about 10 or 15 or 20 percent, but let's start with the publics versus the privates. And then take the privates and take the big-name privates and the middle-tier private schools, where Bradley sits. The big-name privates like Notre Dame and Northwestern, University of Chicago, they've got enough endowment, and they've got enough horsepower to bring in students from rich families who are willing to pay the full boat. So they're in good shape. And they can bring in a certain number of minorities and everything for whom they give almost free tuition scholarships. So that's not a problem. They can balance their books. Bradley, on the other hand, always had middle-class students who required some scholarships to be competitive with U of I or Iowa or Iowa State or whatever it is, Marquette. Now, Marquette is in deep financial trouble. Bradley's in financial trouble. Marquette being a Jesuit school, I don't know about all the Jesuit schools, it seems like Santa Clara is not in financial trouble but it is part of Silicon Valley, so but there's a percentage of private, midsized private schools that were in trouble before the virus. By trouble I mean that they were spending each year more money than they brought in on revenue for their tuition to operate. Usually 88 percent of their operating budget is tuition-driven. They were spending money they didn't have. They were deferring maintenance, and they were doing all sorts of things. At the same time, they were hiring more nonacademic people, but refuse to call them Administration. The operating budget was going up, while tuition revenue was going down. To survive, they either borrow money or tapped into the portion of the endowment that was not restricted and not used for collateral for the loans for the new buildings.

DePue: More of these people that I was referring to as administrators that you were calling—

Podlasek: Administrators, yeah. (laughter) And they're saying, well, in order to attract the students, we've got to provide all these additional services that they're demanding. So math services, writing, you know, all sorts of skills, extra chemistry classes in the summer and all sorts of stuff like that. But a lot of healthcare, a lot of psychological counseling. I've been offended. I'm hurting. What can I do? And it's contagious. You know, once one or two students have their feelings hurt, then everybody has their feelings hurt. And then they all need counseling. And then it just keeps going on. You know, when I was growing up, your feelings were hurt, that's tough, you know. (laughter) Huh? You know? And if your teacher said something to you or whipped your butt, you didn't tell your parents because the teacher was always right in Catholic schools.

DePue: It takes me back to the comment of the priest at your high school.

Podlasek: Joliet Catholic? Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Yeah.

Podlasek: Damn, did I learn that algebra. (laughter) Huh? I sort of expected to be whipped if I didn't do my homework. If I didn't get whipped, I did my homework.

DePue: Would that be a quick ticket out, losing your job if something like that happened today in—?

Podlasek: That'd be a quick ticket to Stateville. (laughter)

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: But yeah, but we're back to the financial situation. There's about reading the Chronicle of Higher Education inside higher education and everything. There's about 20 or 30 percent, I'd say, of the midsized private schools that are in financial trouble. Now, there's also some public schools, like Eastern, Western, and Southern and Northern that are losing enrollment dramatically, and they're in financial trouble too. They can't lay off people fast enough. So just before I came today I went to Inside Higher Education, and they did some stories about percentages of people who are being laid off and what age group they are and what ethnicity they are and that sort of thing. Everybody's paying attention to it, but bottom line is there's not enough students because the number of high school students is going down. Not enough high school students for the bricks and mortar schools to balance the budget. And as their tuition is going up, and the parents are resisting. And the parents are wanting to renegotiate their financial aid. And instead of making April first the deadline for next fall, they now made it May first, and now they're going to have to make it June first in order to try to get their enrollment numbers. So you build a budget by saying there's going to be X number of freshman students at Y discount rate. And then you put out contracts for faculty and

staff and everything else based on that in April. But, they're not meeting those goals.

DePue: You're starting this by saying the number of high school students is decreasing. Is that a problem unique to Illinois where we have some migration?

Podlasek: Right, it's more than that. Yeah, more in Illinois. The state board of higher education has been writing reports on this for about two years or three years. That high school graduates are going down, and the out-migration rate of high school graduates is going up. So more students are going to Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama. Alabama's recruiting in Chicago area.

DePue: And not just athletes?

Podlasek: Not just athletes, just students. And Florida and some of the better schools are, you know, Clemson would probably come and Norte Dame, of course, takes a good chunk out of Chicago area, but they take a chunk all over. And then there's some smaller schools Bradley's size, like Elon, E-L-O-N in North Carolina. They are just going gangbusters. Most of their students come from New York, Massachusetts, and places like that, some from North Carolina. There's pockets. Endicott in Massachusetts is doing fine.

DePue: I wonder if the premier colleges and universities in Illinois, and I'll mention a couple. You might want to add one or two more. Northwestern University, University of Illinois, University of Chicago. These are premier universities with very high reputations. How are they doing compared to the midsized schools you're talking about?

Podlasek: Well, they have enormous number of applications because they've now gotten rid of the ACT/SAT requirement. So they're up 100 percent in applications. There's a lot of wealthy people who thought their kids could never get into Northwestern or Chicago or whatever it is who are now submitting applications hoping that their kid could get in. Now, whether they have a backup school if that doesn't happen, I don't know. My grandson wanted to get into Syracuse, and they gave him some money, but it's $72,000 tuition sticker price, and they gave him some money but not enough to do it. He's at New Haven where they gave him almost a full ride in tuition in New Haven, Connecticut. So he went to New Haven.

DePue: One of the aspects of finances in colleges and universities I've got a little bit of experience with is being and adjunct professor. And that seems to have grown a lot over the last decade or two as well.

Podlasek: Right, right.

DePue: And what is driving that?

Podlasek: Well, first of all, they're not tenured, so you can lay them off right away. Second, they don't pay very much to an adjunct professor unless maybe you had a sweetheart deal. But we're paying, like, $5,000, $6,000 per class.

DePue: For a year?

Podlasek: One course.

DePue: To teach for the semester?

Podlasek: Semester, yeah.

DePue: Okay, that doesn't balance too many people's books, I wouldn't think.

Podlasek: Right, and there is a full-time cadre of adjuncts who just float around the country to teach courses. And they just love to teach, and they want to do it. Maybe you're retired, and maybe you want to teach a course. Maybe you have an agenda that you want to promote. We've got people from Caterpillar who are retired who are teaching courses free of charge.

DePue: How important and beneficial is that to Bradley, to have people like that?

Podlasek: Extremely. I mean, we got a guy teaching. He was in charge of intellectual property at Caterpillar. He retired. He's teaching free of charge, teaching intellectual property course. Engineering students are signing up for it like mad. And it's a great course.

DePue: How many of those adjunct professors are just hoping and praying that they're going to be able to get a position that will lead to a tenure track?

Podlasek: These guys who are retired with fat retirements, they were at $400,000 when they were working.

DePue: Is that the exception or the rule?

Podlasek: Well, there's a few of those guys around, but they sort of set the trend, you know. They're all get fired and become an adjunct professor at Bradley.

DePue: Okay. Well, what I'd like to do now, and we've been really hitting on a lot of this already, but now I want to put that total focus, zoom in on what's going on in higher education today and all the different aspects of that. A lot of this we've already touched with to a certain extent, but again, that's the focus now and the snapshot today. You've touched on this already, and a lot of this is based on the comment that you gave me beforehand, the things that were motivating and interesting you. "Higher education is a business whose product is a skilled graduate." We talked about that quite a bit already, but let's start with this then, the measure of the freshman coming in today, and how ready are they to be in a college environment?

Podlasek: The percentage of students who are freshman that we are seeing that can pass the basic math and basic writing courses is dropping dramatically. We would have fifty students in our basic—this isn't politically correct—kiddy math. And it's now up to 160. And we are giving scholarships to those people. And then people in writing, they're also needing extra work, extra courses. Puts enormous pressure on the faculty to pass them. Because we need the revenue. We need to hold the revenue. We need the retention. So those numbers are dropping off. I mean, the people who are college ready is dropping off. So I expect engineering to drop off this semester, this year.

DePue: Does that ultimately erode the quality of the student going out for four years later?

Podlasek: That's right. I mean, student coming out is a function of what's coming in the pipeline. So then the employers start saying, ooh, these graduates at Bradley, they're no longer comparable to the U of I in engineering. They don't have that same skillset. Then they quit showing up to recruit students. And so then you're stuck with a group of students graduating that can't find jobs. Now, the counterforce is that with the Internet, they're out looking for students all over the place. One of the girls who graduated industrial engineering, I think she got $100,000 job at Microsoft. Yeah, Microsoft, I think. So there are good jobs out there. There's a journalism graduate I know. Well, I know her grandfather, but she's a journalism graduate from Northwestern. She got $100,000-year job with Amazon. She's running their Amazon wedding thing. You know, somebody's getting married and they want to put a list of things together from Amazon to buy. What do they call those? Weddings—

DePue: Wedding planners?

Podlasek: Yeah, the wedding planner, but it's more like, here's all the pots and pans and—I'm not into that, but—(laughter)

DePue: Obviously not, Bob. We started earlier, you mentioned that they're no longer requiring a couple of these colleges and universities, no longer requiring ACT and SAT.

Podlasek: Right, a majority of them. Majority of them are not. There's groupthink. The ACT/SAT is only one metric and is a modest predictor of student success, but it's the only thing universities have. Measuring cognitive work ethic, ability to manage distractions, ability to fail and fail forward and persistence is difficult, so the fallback is ACT/SAT.

DePue: Do you want to do that if you want to ensure you got the quality coming in the first place?

Podlasek: Well, it's the groupthink that has taken over at the universities. One or two do it, and everybody does. And then all of a sudden they begin to realize that quality of their graduates is really spotty, not that there's bad. There's good

ones, but there's a lot of bad ones too. So then your numbers with *US News & World Report* and the *Wall Street Journal* and all the rest of those rating services go down. So then all of a sudden, oh, what are we going to do? University needs a group of students that know how to fail forward, know how to fail often and know that failure is good. But if every time they fail they go into a hissy fit, you know, "This exam's too hard. You're making us work too hard. This problem's too hard," all that stuff, you know, that's the kind of new stuff that's coming out.

DePue: So what does your professor say? I mean, do they have any legitimate recourse to have their grades adjusted?

Podlasek: Everybody's got a recourse to have their grade adjusted. The final say for a grade; the instructor submits the grade, but the provost is the chief academic officer. So he or she can decide to change any grade they want. You can change it from a D to a pass/fail. You can change it from a C to a A or a B. You can make an appeal, and there's an appeal process already set up and everything. And you can say this instructor coughed too much or looked at me funny or is a racist or whatever it is, you know.

DePue: Did any of that happen in your case?

Podlasek: No. I was careful not to have it happen, but right now I'm worried about it. I mean, it's just like, you know, just yesterday I had a conference call with the guys in Peoria about the sheriff in Peoria county has got twenty vacancies. And he's got no names on his desk of people wanting the jobs.

DePue: Well, that's a different kind of problem what we're talking about here with grades though, is it not?

Podlasek: Well, but the faculty are going to be doing the same thing. They're going to say, I'm not going to get involved in this thing. It's a lot safer to give everybody an A.

DePue: So this is a factor of what we've been hearing about grade inflation going on in colleges?

Podlasek: Sure, but it's, I mean, if the student puts up a big fight and you've got all these other classes and everything to do, I mean, these committees are, you know, fill out this form, write out this report. Lawyers are involved. You're better off just giving the student an A and not worry.

DePue: And you felt those kind of pressures even your last few years there?

Podlasek: Yeah, yeah. Now, I think the students I see are very good and everything, but there's a few students who just slough off, but what are you going to do? Your hands are tied. You can't fight it off.

DePue: I would imagine you're in the hard sciences, you're in the engineering, you give them a problem, there's one answer. There's only one correct answer, shall I say.

Podlasek: Correct, correct.

DePue: So is that problem we've been talking about here for the humanities a little bit more challenging for the professors?

Podlasek: Sure. Now, in engineering, there's only a few good problems you can put on tests. And out there is this vast Internet where the students can search the problems and find the problem and just copy it down and submit it. So then if you challenge student, and I've done that once, the student says they did not. You say yes. It's his word against your word.

DePue: But they're sitting in a classroom and they don't have the cellphone next to them, why would you have any concern that they're—

Podlasek: Oh yeah remote exams and cheating are very tricky. Creating perfectly worded unambiguous exam questions in engineering is difficult unless it is a pure proof. So we've got one professor who gives the remote exam on the computer in front. Then he makes the students put a ladder behind them, tape on their cellphone and videotape what they were looking at while they were working on their computer solving the problems to make sure that there wasn't other sources of information around. (laughter) I don't know how long he's going to get away with that.

DePue: Okay, that's a unique approach.

Podlasek: There's a lot of creative approaches out there.

DePue: But it means that the professor's not thinking of other things. He's thinking about how to stop cheating.

Podlasek: Oh yeah, all the time. And these problems are hard if you haven't seen them before, and even if you've seen them before they're hard. So that is the challenge. And that's where failure comes in, that you fail, fail often, and fail forward. Just keep working at it. And there's a group of students who just thrive on that. They love it. And there's students who could game the system, so I just think more students are gaming the system.

DePue: Figuring how they can get the high grades with, what minimum effort sometimes?

Podlasek: Right, but you know, if high grades are rewarded, just like it's rewarded if you get into high-rated schools, they'll find ways to game the systems like those movie stars did for their kids at USC and wherever they got into.

DePue: Who got rowing scholarships even though they were never on a rowing team.

Podlasek: Right, right. I mean, we've got into an era where ethics sort of drops off. I mean, whether it's in journalism or where it's at, so that's carried on at the university too, so—

DePue: I wonder what your thought would be on this question: should every high school graduate think about going to college someplace?

Podlasek: Yeah, I think, you know, off the top of my head at this point in time, that probably going to college just to learn something, to relearn what you learned in K-through-twelve, particularly high school, so you know that material well is useful just to relearn high school. But then you have to pick up a skill, whether it's a plumber or electrician or auto mechanic or an airline pilot. There's going to be a huge shortage of airline pilots. Any of those skills you have to pick up. But I'm thinking that the people who are trying to become carpenters, they need a lot of math. They need to write contracts. They need to deal with computers and be savvy with computers. They need a lot of interpersonal skills. They need a lot of things they could learn in college to be a good carpenter or a plumber. So why not go to four years of college to mature and learn all these skills you should have really learned in high school?

DePue: So the problem is maybe we need to fix our high schools.

Podlasek: Probably. Now, there's a group, called the Murphy Foundation in Chicago that some of my friends are participants, that identifies sixth grade students in Chicago, minorities, 100 percent minorities, and give them scholarships to finish grade school and then go on to college. Some of them go on to the Evans Scholar program. Some of them go on to other programs. They identify these students who are motivated, have fire in their belly, who are willing to work, willing to fail, and then put them out to different universities and actually some of these private high schools want these students to diversify and do their whatever they call it. There's one Murphy's scholar from Chicago that's at a high school in Carmel, California, and there's about five of them in high schools in Massachusetts that are going away to high school. And there's families in Chicago, minorities that pool their money and send their kid to, say, Lake Forest Academy or something like that, residential. And then he's in my class, so he's a minority, African American, and lived in Woodlawn or somewhere close, but some family member or two family members had some money, and they moved him over to Lake Forest Academy. He graduated from Lake Forest Academy, and then he came to Bradley. And then he studied mechanical engineering for three and a half years because that was a condition

set by his family. Then he decided he really wanted to be singer in a rock band, so he dropped out. And but his financial backers were putting a lot of pressure on him to get a degree of value kind of thing. The nicest kid you ever met. I would ask him, you know, "What was it like going to high school in Lake Forest and hanging out with your buddies on weekends compare to going to high school down in Chicago in Woodlawn?" (laughter) He would laugh, and we would joke. Huh? How carefree the kids were, and they were getting drunk all the time. You couldn't do that in Chicago. You'd be dead.

DePue: Yeah, yeah. Okay. We've been at this for a little bit over two hours today. And next time I wanted to talk about some issues from the larger world that had been going on in universities but also talk about how COVID-19 impacted university college life as well. I think that's an important addition. So I'm recommending we call it a day.

Podlasek: Okay. There's lots of stories to be told about this and students that I've had. I had a student from Papua New Guinea. And he was a mechanical engineering student—

DePue: We're still being recorded here, by the way.

Podlasek: That's okay. But his father went to school in England, got a PhD. He was a native of Papua New Guinea. He's got a degree in some animal husbandry or something, I don't know. But he's some kind of government executive in Papua New Guinea. And there's a group, a religious group around Peoria, and there's a lot of those, that did some missionary work in Papua New Guinea, and they invited him to come to Peoria and go to Bradley and became mechanical—he wanted mechanical engineering. He kept taking my course every semester and then dropping. And you know, I ask him what's going on? You know, he just, he couldn't handle material science, much less thermodynamics or any of these other classes. I don't know what happened to him. I can check his name perhaps, but it was a story where you have a minority student from Papua New Guinea, sounds like his family was educated, but he just couldn't. And he had a family that was nurturing him outside of Peoria and everything, but it just didn't work out kind of thing. We try, you know, and I try to work with those kids any way I can. But I don't know. What do you do? Do you have more people to help them learn? This other kid, he just wanted to be a singer. He had his day job was going to school. His night job was singing in bands and stuff. And he was good. I mean, he's probably going to be famous, but—(laughter)

DePue: Well, then he'll look back on this as, "See, I told them so." Thank you, Bob.

Podlasek: I told him, you know, go for it. You know, do what you love.

DePue: Okay. (end of interview session)

Interview with Robert Podlasek

EH-A-L-2021-010

Interview # 3: May 4, 2021

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Tuesday, May 6, 2021. This is Mark DePue, and this is my third session with Professor—fourth session?

Podlasek: Fourth day, isn't it? Isn't this May fourth?

DePue: No, this is May fourth, yes. May fourth, third session with Professor Bob Podlasek who's keeping me straight. Why was I thinking it was sixth? We're rushing the calendar here. Sorry about that. Thank you for catching that, Bob. And we have talked quite a bit about your experiences at Bradley University already, and now it's kind of more general conversation about higher education in the larger world. That's what I'm calling this. I wanted to start with this question: how much influence do you see that our students today that you're dealing with have with social media?

Podlasek: Well, of course, you know, social media's both a blessing and a curse, and it's pervasive for the students. And certainly, in terms of learning or gaining factual information, social media can really be an asset if you fact check it to make sure it's accurate. And that means you have to spend five or ten minutes sometimes just trying to fact check to see whether what you see is accurate or whether the spin is accurate. If you have some trusted sources, the social media works very well. If you have sources that are not so much trusted, you have to really be careful. And of course, when you're doing things in my

world of engineering, usually you're doing experiments. You're gathering data and checking it. So you're fact checking it in a different way than social media. But social media's really good for the students to gain information. On the other hand, it's a great way to get a distraction during lectures in class and during exams. You have to ask the students to put their cell phones on the floor in front of them or something like that. And sometimes that works. Sometimes it doesn't, it seems like. Maybe they have two phones, sometimes, during the exam, so—

DePue: Really? How about during, if a presentation or a lecture, they allowed to have their cellphones out for something like that?

Podlasek: Initially I didn't allow it. Cellphones were to be turned off during lectures and everything. But the pressure got too great. About two or three years ago I quit trying to enforce it. But for many years I enforced it and it worked. The students didn't.

DePue: The pressure coming from the students or faculty, administration?

Podlasek: Students. From the students primarily.

DePue: What was their argument?

Podlasek: Well, they need to stay in contact with their parents or something in case of an emergency. (laughter) They came up with creative ideas. Oh, they had to stay in contact with their girlfriend or boyfriend, or my friend is at the hospital or something, and then it just kept blossoming into new excuses. And then the excuses you can't fact check, so it just gets—

DePue: Did you give extra credit points for good excuses?

Podlasek: Well, I sometimes do, but for real good excuses I don't give extra credit.

DePue: Well, I was being cynical on that comment anyway.

Podlasek: No, I mean sometimes they say I missed the exam because I was in the emergency room. My girlfriend stabbed me in the shower, or something like that. I generally didn't buy into those excuses.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: But they've tried it all, you know.

DePue: I'm glad now that I am beyond the timeframe when I was teaching in colleges. And I'm setting that up for the question. What do you think about the fact that now faculty, that you are evaluated by your students and it's all over the Web?

Podlasek: There's always been rate your professor, so it's always been all over the Web, my sense, as long as I can remember. The students can evaluate it and that sort of thing. And that makes one just more careful. And it also is probably good, you know. Students want to know what the other students think of the instructor. In the business I was in in engineering, there's usually one section or two sections of the class. So typically, if a student wants to take thermodynamics, which I didn't teach, but only one or two faculty members were there. But students in other departments, I know, would stay away from some instructors. And students in fine arts would not take courses that were face to face. They always wanted everything online. So when the department chair offers a course face-to-face, nobody would sign up.

DePue: Even before COVID?

Podlasek: Yeah, that was before COVID that happened. So the students become pretty particular about classes that they select. But in a program where there's a lot of required courses, and typically if there's two or three sections, usually only two at Bradley, students didn't have much choice as to who the instructor would be. And that happens across the board.

DePue: I would think that, and this is pure speculation on my part, that having those student evaluations up makes most professors a little bit cautious and perhaps tend to err towards being more generous in grading.

Podlasek: Well, yeah, the grading is another whole issue. And pre-COVID and COVID and now post-COVID, I don't know. But the grading has always been an issue. At the end of each year, the university publishes a list of the average grade per department and per college. Over the years, I always look at the last ten years because that's the easier, there's always an escalation in the average grade point average over the last ten years, sort of reflecting what's happening in K through twelve. Everybody gets a trophy kind of thing. And that's pre-COVID. In the midst of COVID, as I may have mentioned, I think I calculated 40 percent of the students last spring made the dean's list. That's a remarkable number. So forty percent of the students have half As and half Bs or better. All of a sudden the grading got a lot easier. And there is a sense that you want to retain the students because you need the revenue. And the students are now totally in control. So if they can find some reason to challenge their grade, they do. And a lot depends on their parents, but so you have to be careful. And when it's all said and done, the student wins no matter how many appeals there are or anything. It goes to the provost. The students win.

DePue: There's a couple points in our conversation today I'm going to be quoting you from discussion points that you gave me beforehand. Is that the right term for what you gave me, talking points?

Podlasek: Yup.

DePue: And here's a comment that you made: "The core knowledge required to understand how the global economy works, it's getting more complicated while at the same time course content continues to be watered down."

Podlasek: Right. The world is getting so complex, but you have to make the exams so simple —finding unambiguous questions for which the answers are not debatable is difficult. Further, after one semester all the rest of the students know which questions will be on the exam because there are a limited number of suitable multiple choice questions. In my department, we generally don't give multiple choice exams. We just don't have that kind of choice. And we don't have textbooks that provide multiple choice. Well, recently we're getting textbooks that give multiple choice questions where the instructor can select the multiple choice included on the exam. But they're poorly written. Then you get into this huge dispute with the student whether my answer is right even though it's not your answer kind of thing. And even in engineering, and how much fight are you going to put out? How much time are you going to spend fighting all of these issues? Department chairs spend enormous amount of time with students challenging grades. That kind of mindset was not prevalent when I was an undergraduate in the '60s. You just took what you got, and that was it. But so I don't know if I answered your question directly, but grading is not getting easier, number one. And number two, students are getting more vocal and wanting to challenge the grades under the assumption that the grade that they get in the class influences their job prospects.

DePue: My understanding of engineering is it's kind of like mathematics. Obviously, there's some complexities involved with engineering that you don't have, but my point is that it's a black and white field. The answer is either correct or it's not correct; that you're asking somebody to design a bridge, and it either stands up over the years or it collapses when it's not supposed to.

Podlasek: You're right. The mathematics is deterministic. There's one answer. Two plus two is four, unless you're a little bit out in left or right field. But there are a hundred ways to design the bridge. And there's not only standing, it's how much does it cost? How much maintenance is associated with it? How much vibration is associated with it? So there's a lot of other issues that make it no one right answer. And there's a lot of debate that goes on designing a bridge. I'm in mechanical engineering, but civil engineering is simpler but there's so many issues you have to deal with. If you're just thinking about a bridge over the river, you've got expansion joints that change with temperature and that sort of thing. You've got corrosion. You've got areas that you can't inspect or claim to inspect and don't inspect, like the bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, St. Paul that collapsed. There's a lot of debatable issues, which is also true in the space program. I mean, people debate every bit of redundancy that you have as to whether you should fly it or not. And I got involved in quite a bit of those things when I worked at the Kennedy Space Center.

DePue: I would imagine that's part of the excitement and the interest people can generate by dealing with engineering problems.

Podlasek: Well, it is. For example, You'll have these long debates as to whether a tile being replaced on the shuttle is right or whether it should be replaced at all. You know, you have 29,000 tiles on the shuttle or. And every time you take a trip, some of the tiles are eroded and destroyed, and you have to go in and change them. And all replacement shuttle tiles have to be custom made because the tiles slide around on the body of the orbiter. And so you have to keep a gap between each one to obtain the proper heat transfer strategy, so it gets really complicated, and there's big debates and all of that. So math is deterministic, and, you know, there's one right answer to a differential equation, but it's not true with design of an engineering thing. In theory, theory and practice are the same, but in practice they are not.

DePue: Okay. Well, you might want to punt on this question too in terms of what the term woke actually means.

Podlasek: Yeah, I think I've been following all of this, and the only thing I pick up in the news media is being woke—or get woke, be broke, and that sometimes it costs a lot of money to be woke. And if you have the money, like a big university, there's really no problem. Big universities, the top hundred universities control a big portion of the endowment that's out there, and I think the top four have 25 percent of all the endowments. This came out in an article this weekend. So you know, if you have a lot of money, you can do it. But as you bring in more students who are not college ready, you need to have more student services. You have to offer courses that are remedial, if the students aren't ready for college because they come from the inner city of Chicago schools. All of those things cost extra money. Where does that money come from? Do you get rid of the athletic department? Because they're losing money too. Or do you take it from the operating expense from the departments? So you've got those tradeoffs to do that.

DePue: So you comment, "Be woke, get broke," is in reference to trying to deal with the needs and the demands of students when they're coming in?

Podlasek: Right, and how do you finance that? If you have a big endowment, like Northwestern, Harvard, Stanford, you've got enough money coming in that you've got some wiggle room in your budget. But if you're a private school, private university, four or five thousand, Tulsa, Bradley, Gonzaga, something like that, you've got a certain operating budget. And if you need more money for one thing, you've got to take it from someone else because your operating budget is driven by your tuition revenue, primarily. And maybe a few donations and things like that. But your operating budget is basically driven by tuition revenue. So if you don't have enough students or you have to increase your discount rate, which is happening in spades right now, then you have less money to spend on the academic side or the student services side or

the administration side. It's the academic side that's suffering right now, the university, you take those three. So that means you don't get to rehire people. If somebody leaves, you don't hire people to take their place. So when I retired last July, there were two other people that retired so it was three out of a faculty of fifteen. They lost three faculty members, they got to replace none. Now, we have another resignation in the department, and there's a question whether they'll be able to replace him. So the department has gone down 20 percent in faculty when our department, mechanical engineering was the second largest at the university. We had more students, 320 to350 majors, more than any other department except nursing.

These financial tradeoffs have just got really serious due to the decline in enrollment and the increase in the discount rate, which people don't mention much at all. They kept saying, well, what's your enrollment? You look at Eastern or Western or any university around.

DePue: When you say the discount rate, you're meaning the actual price that a student is paying when they enroll?

Podlasek: Right. When each school calculates the amount of revenue they get from tuition. Say you have a thousand students and your sticker price is $30,000, just for sake of an example. And the question is how much money do you get per student when it's all said and done? So if you have a thousand new freshman, how much discounting do you have to do in order to get a thousand students? Because everybody else is discounting too, like an airline ticket. So generally, historically, it was about 30 percent discount rate. You have, if your sticker price was 30,000, on the average, all the thousand students, you collected 70 percent of that money. Now it's 40 to 50 percent and going up to 60 percent. So, schools are discounting just to get the headcount to fill the dorms and at least cover your dorm costs. You've got universities that have built dorms and borrowed money, and they're sitting idle. But the payments on those buildings still continues.

DePue: My impression that the college dorm and the dorm room that I might have had fifty years ago is a tad bit different from the dorm room they have today?

Podlasek: I think so. I haven't been in any dorm rooms lately. But yeah, I mean, my case they lived at the Evans Scholar House, and we didn't have much. But we didn't stay in our room much, you know. I mean, we had four people per room.

DePue: I'm just wondering if a lot of the building that has happened in the last ten to twenty years has been for student amenities that have a price tag with it.

Podlasek: Well, and the students demanded, when they're looking at colleges, they demand very nice accommodations. My grandson is at University of New Haven. It was between Syracuse and New Haven. He wanted to go to

Syracuse, but it was just too much debt to accumulate, so he went to University of New Haven where he got 75 percent off on tuition because he was ACT thirty-one. But they put him in a pod with twelve male students, two per room, and they had a dining room and a kitchen and that sort of thing. So two of the kids snuck out, contracted the virus, came back. Then everybody was quarantined. Then other students in the pod got the virus. The quarantine continued on, and finally my grandson ended the whole thing by getting his second shot, his second COVID shot. So now he's no longer quarantined, but he was quarantined for a good portion of the semester.

DePue: Oh, wow.

Podlasek: And the kids kept passing the COVID virus to each other in this pod. And it started with two of the sneaking out, going to a party somewhere, being normal college students. (laughter) So you know, lots of little things you don't think about are happening.

DePue: Little bit change of subject here, there have been quite a few surveys, polls done with faculty trying to determine their political affiliations and political biases, you know, left and right. And they've recently see studies that breakdown for the humanities versus the hard sciences versus medicine, whatever the case may be. Can you talk about your experiences in terms of the nature of the faculty you've been dealing with over these years?

Podlasek: Yeah, it's a great question. First of all, you have to keep in mind that I was the assistant dean of the engineering college for twenty-six years, and there was no associate dean. So I had to interact with all the other colleges at the university all the time. And secondly, we had a lunch table of about fifteen or twenty people that met every day, but you know, not the same twenty people, and we would interact. And I was the only—well, there was maybe one other engineering faculty member, but they were mainly fine arts and liberal arts faculty, primarily psychology and that sort of thing. We discussed world affairs and every other issue, very cordially. But you knew who was far left, right, and everything like that, so you had a sense of that. I was a member of the Kern Family Foundation project. And I think there were twenty-five or thirty universities. We met three times a year, and I would talk with different faculty. And I participated with a lot of Stanford University entrepreneurship programs. We'd meet on campus or go up in the mountains and think deeply and make sure our naval was okay and go on. (laughs) But in that sense, what I read seems to reflect the accurately what I have observed, and that is about 90 percent of the people are left, and about 10 percent are right or conservative. Ninety percent of the faculty are liberal, and probably half of those are far-left, socialist/Marxist kinds of people. And that's just the way departments hire people, you know. A history department is not going to hire a conservative person, no matter what their commitment is to diversity and all the rest of that. It just doesn't happen.

DePue: So diversity does not extend to diversity of thought?

Podlasek: Correct, so what's his name, Hanson Walter, is it? Who's that professor who writes articles? He just wrote one.

DePue: Oh, David?

Podlasek: David Hanson? He's a former professor, writes articles. He just wrote an article this weekend on that subject. You know, people talk about diversity, but there's no diversity of thought at a university.

DePue: And what's the danger of that?

Podlasek: Well, it violates the original premises of what a university is about. If you start with Cardinal Newman in 1850 or somewhere along that period when he sort of defined the modern university. There was a lot more diversity of thought in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, even though in the '60s there was a rebellious group, and there was people against the Vietnam War and that sort of thing. But there was still a lot more diversity of thought at the university.

DePue: This is, I think, more of a question of what's going on in the humanities and maybe in the fine arts, but is there a tendency of some of these professors to not just believe these things but to espouse these things in the classroom?

Podlasek: Oh, I wouldn't see why not.

DePue: And to grade accordingly?

Podlasek: Yeah, in engineering I don't see any of that. But I suspect that's what goes on. I mean, you can't help it. These faculty members are so strongly committed to their ideology —I think there's plenty of stories out there. And it seems to me that, you know, the faculty make an effort to be unbiased. They like to think they're unbiased, but I just, I don't see how they can do it.

DePue: Again, you might not have been in position to observe this, but I'm wondering if some of the faculty who maybe lean more traditional would be willing to have a full-threated defense of capitalism?

Podlasek: In classrooms? Yeah. Yeah, in engineering it just doesn't happen. You can talk about current events or something, and there's really not an appetite for any political discussions whatsoever.

DePue: So you're not in a position to really observe that one way or another?

Podlasek: Right, because the students, there's no appetite for it. The only appetite is in the fine arts or liberal arts students, and they're really being coached by their faculty. And as we've come through this COVID thing, we got this double whammy. You got the COVID, but you've had the decline in student

enrollment, I guess a triple whammy, the increase in discount rate, so you have less operating revenue for midsize schools. The big-size schools got the endowments that—they're not in a problem financially. I mean, but they take the midsize schools, so you've got decline in revenue, increasing student services, which takes money from salaries or salary increases or perceived salary increases by the faculty, so they're upset about all of that. So the faculty are all upset. So they feel that they're a victim. They thought they came into academia with tenure and just sort of coasting along, and teach your courses, and then travel to Europe or somewhere in the summer and share stories with your colleagues somewhere. Because, you know, part of your constituency are your colleagues at these other universities. You share ideas and that sort of thing.

DePue: I always figure that a sabbatical was a pretty good gig to have. And I don't know how frequently that occurs for professors.

Podlasek: Yeah, I took my sabbatical every time I qualified.

DePue: And how often was that?

Podlasek: Every seven years.

DePue: Every seven years?

Podlasek: I took a sabbatical for a year.

DePue: From a standard blue-collar worker perspective, that doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

Podlasek: Well, it gives you a chance to sort of think about new ideas and new things. In my case, my last sabbatical, I worked on a project to create a program in entertainment engineering within the mechanical engineering program, a concentration in entertainment engineering. We have other concentrations, energy, biomedical engineering.

DePue: So it goes back to the point I think you made last time we talked about the role that research has for the faculty, the importance of doing the research.

Podlasek: Right, and you want to grow your programs. And I was the guy who started all the Capstone Senior Design Projects between Bradley and Disney Orlando. So I did twenty-two of those, and so I had a background in entertainment engineering, and I thought, there's a couple of schools have started entertainment engineering, primarily University of Nevada, Las Vegas. And I thought, maybe we could pull something together which would be part theater and part engineering, which is what Nevada, Las Vegas did. And they got funding from the legislature to do it and everything, and then the legislature in Nevada pulled the rug out when they ran out of money. So their whole program collapsed.

DePue: You've talked quite a bit about the tensions now in financing, how that has changed over the years.

Podlasek: And changed attitudes.

DePue: I wonder if you can address as a percentage of expense, how expensive higher education has been, and it's growing at a higher rate than inflation for quite a long time.

Podlasek: Right, it has been.

DePue: And what has been driving that?

Podlasek: Well, basically it's been the student services, at least my sense at Bradley, the amount of money spent on the academic side of the house, the professors, has been constant or maybe declining. And at other universities—what's his name, Hanson, Davis? Hanson?

DePue: Victor Davis Hanson.

Podlasek: Victor Davis Hanson. He talked about this too. But you know, some schools are 30 percent tenured professors and 70 percent adjuncts and all sorts of other things. Now, he could be talking about community colleges and that sort of thing. The faculty is sort of staying constant, and they're backfilling with a lot of temporary faculty people. U of I does that. Bradley does a little bit of that, but generally, most of the classes are taught by full-time faculty members. Some of the temporary faculty members are very good, and they're passionate. And in Peoria we have Caterpillar with a lot of retirees with immense world knowledge. They know so much about each country. And so these folks come and teach at Bradley free of charge. They're really an asset. The students get to really find somebody who maybe was in charge of marketing in South America for ten or fifteen years, lived in Peoria and commuted to South America half of the month. And he knew the culture. He knew all the things because, in the case of Caterpillar, you have to sell into the culture. And each government entity buys Caterpillar toys. (laughter)

DePue: Expensive toys.

Podlasek: Expensive toys. And each government entity controls, like in Colombia, a mine or something, so they could shut it down in a heartbeat. And then Caterpillar's financing, you know, somebody's starting a mine, but Caterpillar Finance Division is financing it, so they need to know what are they going to do with this equipment if something goes south?

DePue: Well, getting back to the issue of the expense of college and that tension between facilities for the students and paying the faculty, I wonder if Bradley, in your experience, there was graduate students who were teaching assistants and pulling a lot of the weight for the teaching of the school?

Podlasek: Well, there's two questions there. One, the facilities were generally covered through student housing. If you're building a new something, dorm, for example, that was covered by the student housing expense, which is about ten thousand per year, or maybe more. You would bump it up a little bit. The other tension I'm talking about is in student services. How much coaching do they need? How much do you have? So that's the number that was growing rapidly is the student services. Students have more emotional needs. We've hired more staff to deal with that. There's more people dealing with parents. There's more people dealing with just students not adjusting and needing to make the adjustment. You want to retain the students. You've invested so much money in recruiting somebody, you hate to see them leave after their freshman or sophomore year, for a bunch of reasons. And so you want to bring them along, so for example, I had a Hispanic student in my class. She was in her third year, but she only had enough credits for two years, and she had built up enormous debt, and she finally just gave up, and left the university with a lot of debt. The other students in the class came to me and said look, this isn't fair. What can you do? She was passing my class. But she was just so overwhelmed because of her life experiences just didn't lend itself to doing mathematical stuff like engineering. But when they leave with a lot of debt, everybody's hurting. Everybody feels bad, faculty, university, and everything. The idea is provide student services, provide coaching to help her get through the courses.

DePue: Again, the other question in there was whether or not teaching assistants, graduate students who are helping with the teaching load.

Podlasek: Oh yeah, sorry about that. Yeah, Bradley had a policy where the teaching assistants did not teach any lecture classes or anything. And they were only laboratory assistants.

DePue: Is that strictly for the engineering school?

Podlasek: Strictly for the engineering school. The best example I know is electrical engineering. Every laboratory, and there were a lot of them, had a faculty mentor who was there to help the students wire up their circuits and make smoke. And they would also have a student assistant there to sort of try to prevent misadventures in the lab. (laughter) And fortunately, as electricity changed to small currents and voltages, there wasn't much smoke compared to when I was a student.

DePue: Okay. Here's another thing that you've heard a lot of discussion for almost decades, and that is politically correct speech and whether or not that is something that you've seen evolve over time in the university.

Podlasek: Absolutely. You never know where some student might be offended by some comment or thought, no matter how innocent it is. And it really gets tense. I was running a program where students would get an employment at

Caterpillar, primarily at the research center, and then they would work ten to fifteen hours a week at, oh, today's rate is about twenty-two dollars an hour to twenty-eight dollars an hour, so it's a very good job. Then they'd work all summer long as interns, and then they'd work during the semester, and they would make enough money to get their way through college. And some of them were really creative. They started their own little empires within Caterpillar. And so there's over five hundred students that participated in this program. But these students would earn money and work. So your question again was the—

DePue: Politically correct.

Podlasek: Politically correct. I would have to woodshed the students and say here's what's politically correct and here's what's not politically correct from a business point of view. Don't bring in your cellphone or, make sure your etiquette on Internet is right. But in the classroom, the politically correct, any word that you use that may offend someone becomes a big issue. So trying to decide what pronoun to use to describe someone is political correctness. And as I mentioned earlier, that the sixth circuit federal court ruled in favor of a professor down at Portsmouth, Ohio because he refused to use the appropriate pronoun for a student. The student sued him. Then he countersued the university. And he was able to find support to appeal his case, and it got to the—this is a 2018 case that finally made it to the sixth circuit, and a three-judge panel ruled in his favor. Now, this was two weeks ago, so now it's a question as to whether the university is going to appeal it, and if somebody's going to appeal it to the Supreme Court. Some of these politically correct terms, like pronouns, are one thing, but there's any number of things that all of a sudden set people off. And so you have to just sort of just limit your vocabulary a lot. And of course, that's just a new kind of thing.

DePue: Now, this recent sixth circuit court of appeals decision, did that come down on the favor of the professor or the—

Podlasek: Professor. It came down in favor of the professor, and just incidentally, there's the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* two newsletters that come out, one weekly and one daily, that cover all of these stories. So it gets pretty quick coverage amongst the faculty because they all grab their *Chronicle of Higher Education* and clutch it under their arm and walk home in the evening.

DePue: What, and commiserate what's going on in higher education?

Podlasek: Right, right. And exactly, you nailed it. (laughs)

DePue: Well, I wanted to read a comment that you had, because again, your talking points, you address this as well: "The issue no longer is learning theoretical concepts but rather how the instructor references the gender of the student."

Podlasek: Yeah, well, that's case there is if this particular professor was an anthropologist, and anthropology's an interesting subject, and there's some theory, but rather than the student understand the concept of anthropology, and you know I'm not an expert in anthropology, but you know, there were principles. Jacob Bronowski was a famous anthropologist. They've gone up and down, and but rather than making an issue in class about how the theory, how it is, how valid is this concept? How broadly does it apply? How can you extend it? What are all of the data points that support the hypothesis? What are the data points that do not support the hypothesis? All of that stuff, that's not covered, you know. You're fighting whether the student is called he, she, or whatever they want to be called, and when you get into these issues, that entire straight just sucks the oxygen out of the learning process, in my view. I mean, it is difficult enough to try to cross boundaries and link counterintuitive ideas, and you can't link any of that, I mean, if you're so concerned about what they're going to say or how they feel about this. Students get offended very easily. And the students who I think are kind of worried about what they're going to do when they graduate sometimes can fall into this trap of being a victim of something. But someone in engineering where, if you're willing to work, there's plenty of jobs for you. They're not. I mean, the only problem they have is getting motivated to do it. If they don't want to do it, that's fine, but if you want a job, there's a job. And you know, there's still a good number of $60,000 to $100,000-a-year jobs for college graduates right now, and it's across the board. You can be a journalism graduate and get a job for $100,000 a year, but it is not at a newspaper in Springfield Illinois.

DePue: Okay, well, we started this portion of the conversation about politically correct speech. Does Bradley have a speech code?

Podlasek: Oh, I'm sure they do. The provost has a speech code. Bradley will not adhere to the free speech code from the University of Chicago. The University of Chicago, about four or five years ago has put together a free speech code for universities of which about 70 universities have adopted. Bradley has not.

DePue: How would you characterize the University of Chicago's code?

Podlasek: I think it's what you think. It's pretty liberal that it accepts people's opinion and looks more at the concept and the theory rather than the words that are being used. And it's not for thin-skinned people.

DePue: Okay, so your use of the term liberal is the classic definition of liberal.

Podlasek: Right, the classic, not the current political definition of liberal.

DePue: Okay. Does Bradley have safe spaces?

Podlasek: Not that I know of, but I'll bet they do. (laughter) I just, it's not a kind of thing that I really pay attention to. Now, when I would see, last spring when I was teaching, I had my list of students, and they gave you pronouns to use at each

student wanted me to use. It just didn't register with me, and I just avoided pronouns and said, "Someone at that table, let's discuss this topic. What do you think?" Or I would call them by their name that was on the list as opposed to a pronoun.

DePue: Were there students who wanted to be called Zee or they or things like that?

Podlasek: Whatever was on their official roster that I got is the name I called them. And if they had a nickname that wasn't on the roster, it wasn't used. So to be safe, I just used the roster that university publishes. And then they also publish below the name a list of pronouns that he should be using for each one of these students.

DePue: How long have you been getting the list of students that included their preferred pronouns?

Podlasek: About a year and a half or so. So look, university needs money. They're going to do anything the students want. Three students show up in the president's office and want pronouns. They're going to get it.

DePue: Okay. Does Bradley invite controversial speakers to the campus?

Podlasek: Not that I know of. The part I was in was the entrepreneurship between engineering and business. And we brought in speakers once a year. We had a fund to do that. It would be someone who succeeded in business, so like the head of Culver's came in, or the head of Redbox or some of the entrepreneurial people who go around the country and speak. They share their experience. Are they controversial? Well, could be. One of them ran a slaughtering house which sold meat online, frozen meat or something. And you know, so to a PETA person, that person might have been controversial, but Bradley traditionally just was not a hotbed for these highly sensitive students whereas at the University of Illinois, has 35,000 undergraduate students. The probably of having three people that belong to PETA is pretty high. But at Bradley the probably of having three people belonging to PETA is pretty low, but I'm just picking this as an example. Who would object to all of that? Well, there's some vegetarians that might object, but they're not all fired up about that whereas at University of Illinois you're going to find people interested in that.

DePue: Okay. Tell me about FIRE: Foundation for Individual Rights and Education.

Podlasek: Right. That's an organization that started up about three years ago that is going gangbusters right now because every time someone who is in midst of free speech or has a free speech thing, they come to their defense. What we've learned is that the first amendment does not apply to private universities, only public universities. So Bradley's lawyers have said this is not something we're interest in—we don't have to adhere to that. But from time to time, FIRE will write a letter to the university about a free speech issue, and but Bradley just

discards it. Because they claim that they do not have knowledge free speech because the first amendment doesn't apply to private entities. There's a little glitch in the first amendment, and I think my research has said that Bradley's position is correct.

DePue: Well, that's very much in line with what we're hearing in today's conversation about social media and Google and Twitter and things like that since those are all private companies, they are free to shut down different platforms and control political speech.

Podlasek: Yeah, I think, I think. But nevertheless, FIRE does get involved in that. You know, and full disclosure, I contribute to FIRE. I give money to them. But they don't get involved with that. But they have a group of lawyers, and then they have another group of lawyers that'll come to your defense. And they try to put social pressure or political pressure or media pressure on the university. But it doesn't work too well with private universities, just like you're talking about. But for public universities, definitely the first amendment applies. So I think they took on the University of Pennsylvania case. They've taken on a whole bunch of cases and won. And so their track record is pretty good, but they're very selective in the cases that they take on. And it's called free speech in education, individual free speech in education, and it's unfortunate that the acronym is FIRE, F-I-R-E because their website is, "the fire." And if you do a Google search on, "The Fire," you'll get a gazillion hits on fires all over the world.

DePue: Forest fires are raging out of control in Colorado.

Podlasek: Right, right. So yeah, I think, you know, just from a Google search, I don't use Google, by the way, I use DuckDuckGo. But because they don't track you. But I happened to use DuckDuckGo this morning or yesterday looking at that. I got so many other hits. I was going to fire them off an email saying rethink your acronym. But there is lots of activity in that area right now. And there's a considerable number of right-wing conservative groups that are defending folks on free speech. And due process is another thing that is big.

DePue: Well, that leads right into my next question then because there has been debate. There was a position that, I believe, the Obama administration had in reference to sexual assault allegations on college campuses that I believe that the Trump administration reversed, and I believe that the Biden administration is going back to what was in reference for the Obama administration. Tell me where Bradley University might be on that issue.

Podlasek: Because Bradly hasn't adopted the University of Chicago free speech standards, which is, like, two pages. They just say first amendment issue doesn't affect us. We got other things to deal with.

DePue: Well, I don't mean to put you on the spot here, but my understanding, in terms of sexual assault allegations, the Trump administration was applying the due process procedures that you would go through and the Obama and Biden administrations are not as strict on apply the due process.

Podlasek: That's my interpretation of it too. And you know, in my particular value system due process is critically important, but that people can make allegations of all sorts of things, and you have to fact check it. And I spend too much time fact checking stuff.

DePue: Because you want to be right.

Podlasek: Well, and not only that, you want to make sure what you recall is correct. So, I spend too much time at the computer just fact checking stuff or checking with people I trust to find out. So when it came to, for example, bankruptcy of universities, I have a bankruptcy attorney who's retired who I trust enormously, and we bounce emails off each other all the time on, you know, how does a university get out from under all the debt that they have and that sort of thing? So, you try to find people who are experts in the field. And you trust them. Sometimes you have to depend on the legal experts in the Springfield YMCA health club locker room.

DePue: Okay. The next series of questions deal with the impact of the coronavirus on higher education from your perspective, obviously. So let's start with the—when it first hit back in March of last year. I believe it was like March seventeenth, something around that timeframe, that the governor basically put the state of Illinois into lockdown. Do you recall how Bradley University dealt with that?

Podlasek: Yeah, the second half of the semester went 100 percent online. My class was face-to-face, and then it shifted to online 100 percent. And that was just to protect everyone. And then the university internally started to scramble and decide how they would conduct classes for the fall of 2000.

DePue: How much did you have to adjust what you're doing to do everything online now?

Podlasek: It's a major adjustment. Most classes were set up for face-to-face. When you're dealing with students, you're always reading their body language, and you're looking to see, is this sticking? Is this resonating? And sometimes students don't really ask enough questions, in engineering particularly. So you're always looking at their body language because they're asking questions with their body language rather than verbally coming out and asking something. So that is gone because it was just difficult to enforce the, particularly having the students keep their cameras on during the Zoom classes. The students all would turn their cameras off quickly. They'd log on

and start the class and then turn the camera and microphone off. And there's a few faculty who demanded that they keep their camera on all the time.

DePue: What happens if they didn't have a camera?

Podlasek: That's a problem. They couldn't do that. What if they were using their iPhone or their smartphone? That sort of thing. So it became a problem. What happened if the student was at home and they didn't have a good Internet connection? They could only listen, and they couldn't hear. So if you've got some of those students who have an Internet connection that was only good enough for audio, and then the other students wanted only audio too, even though they had a better Internet connection, what do you do? You have to treat everybody the same.

DePue: Does that mean you spend a lot more time just dealing with those kinds of issues?

Podlasek: Absolutely, yeah, and that's where most folks have said the content has been watered down a little bit. You just have more issues with that sort of thing. Faculty members who were dealing with computer graphics and sophisticated software where the students had to log on, and their laptop might not have had had the horsepower to deal with the computer graphics to renew the screen. When you're doing Pro/E or some of the computer programs, you have to refresh your screen after you make a change. And if it takes five minutes to refresh your screen because the program is so big, which is not unusual, but on a computer in the lab it takes two seconds because you've got big computers to do it, I mean, if all of a sudden instructor said try this. Do this, this, and this in the graphics, in a computer graphics mode. Students say, "Well, my screen hasn't refreshed yet." I got to wait five minutes. So the rest of the class has to wait so you can move on so you can see it.

DePue: How much of the instruction you're doing had a hands-on component to it before COVID?

Podlasek: Well, we like students to do little experiments in class, to do things. And in my view, hands-on meant a group project in class and that sort of thing. So we would do that where students could interact with each other. At least I did it, last couple of years. And they would have a table, a roundtable, and they would interact, or they would work on their project and come up with some kind of device or something. And they'd bring it to class and discuss it with their partners and that sort of things and then go into the lab and make a part or do 3D printing or something like that. All that personal chemistry and all that networking interaction was gone when you're doing it.

DePue: When you say chemistry, you mean interaction between the students?

Podlasek: Right, right. So invariably, you get teams put together, and you let them self-select the teams, you get the students who need help who could be pulled

along by the other ones, left out. Generally we always assign students randomly in our senior projects and everything else.

DePue: Did all that teamwork and bringing people in and all of that go to the wayside?

Podlasek: That's gone, yeah.

DePue: I would think it's especially a problem when you talked about the electrical engineering classes or chemistry or biology where there's lots of labs. That's all gone?

Podlasek: Now, they have these virtual labs that, my view are inferior, but you could say we're going to do a virtual lab in biology or chemistry or engineering. But it's not the same. And if you talk to the professors, which I do about every week, you know, they still haven't adjusted. Bradley's committed to face-to-face class next fall. And they haven't announced whether or not they're going to require everybody to have vaccination.

DePue: How did the students feel about this? Are there some of the students who prefer the virtual kind of classes?

Podlasek: Based on the feedback I'm getting from faculty, about 25 percent of the students are sort of lost. Seventy-five percent have adopted, adapted, and this is both at the U of I and at Bradley. The University of Illinois, Springfield has always had online classes. If it's macroeconomics or microeconomics or something, online lectures probably would work. I did a comparative economics—I have a degree in economics, so I speak to that. Those classes would work online a lot better than an engineering class, typically. But a math class probably would work all right online if you're not using applications or something. But if you said okay, do this experiment and develop a partial or a differential equation to explain the results or predict the results of the experiment, which is the way you would learn differential equations, then you can't do that.

DePue: So from your experience, would it be accurate to say that the virtual classes has had a negative impact on the quality of the education they're getting?

Podlasek: In terms of biology, chemistry, physics, engineering, yes. In terms of entrepreneurship, where you have students in business and engineering, to a lesser degree, but the answer is yes. If you're teaching a class, which we have in intellectual property, probably not so much. So it depends. If you're teaching thermodynamics and some of the instructors have a lot of little experiments and stuff that they've developed over the years, the answer is yes.

DePue: My impression is you've had a lot of interaction with businesses, you know, the businesses that you're serving with the students that graduate.

Podlasek: Right, right.

DePue: Are you hearing concerns from the business community about the quality the students are going to get because of this?

Podlasek: Generally, yes, each department has an advisory board that meets twice a year, and you get some of that feedback. Usually what the companies do is they only hire from their internship program. If you take John Deere, for example, when they hire engineers, full-time engineers, not contract people, they will only take people from their internship program. So they will start off with about a thousand candidate students in their internship program after at least two interviews on campus, and then they will invite them in for a Thursday and then a full day Friday where they work in teams and they videotape them and everything. And out of that group they pick about five hundred. If you make the first cut, it means you made it for the campus interview. Then they have a second on-campus interview in the evening. Then if you get an invite to Moline, then you're in this thousand group from around the country, all over the country. They invite them in, fly them into it.

DePue: Well, I mean, that's a cutthroat competition.

Podlasek: It is. And if you don't make it through that one, then you're out. So then you got about five hundred students left. And then they offer you a summer job. And then you're rated and evaluated and everything by your peers. And then when it comes time to hiring the next year, a hundred people get offered a job. So that means John Deere has spent an enormous amount of money on their internship program, but it's cheaper than hiring the wrong person who just doesn't fit because it's so hard to fire somebody.

DePue: And the whole point of your discussion here is all that is much more challenging because of the coronavirus lockdowns?

Podlasek: Oh yeah. Now, all of this, I don't know how the companies are going to respond to that. And the companies, you know, the Springfield companies are no different. They've hired, you know, large numbers of interns for the summer. Hansen, a good example, I mean, they hire lots of interns trying to get the right person. Law schools or law graduates, you know, hire interns. They get $75,000 a year equivalent. So companies are going more and more into hiring interns where it's easier to make the selection. Now, there's a few jobs that are hired that are not intern-driven. But the person who gets hired usually has had several internships and gets hired all remotely. But it just happened my niece's son got electrical engineering degree, and he interned for some companies from Wisconsin, but he interned in Georgia for two years. So he had all this experience, and then the company wanted to hire him, but he wanted to work for Schneider, which is a French company in Nashville, because he wanted to live in Nashville. Because that was his desired place. But he had enough experience to overcome not being an intern at Schneider.

Schneider makes electrical controllers and stuff like that. So the companies are hiring people, and they hire them at a good number, $65-, $70,000 to start. But they're careful who they hire. Microsoft picks off student from Bradley, you know, at $90,000 a year. Amazon hired a journalism graduate from Northwestern at $100,000 a year to work in this group that does Amazon's selling to people who are getting married. What do we call that bride's book of—I can't talk about this. I don't know anything about it. Just an update, the job market for engineering college graduates has taken off and now there are many unfilled positions with starting salaries $80,000,000 per year

DePue: And I can't help you on that one.

Podlasek: But there are jobs out there that are just spectacular.

DePue: And again, the issues here is how COVID has changed that dynamic, and I would think if you really aren't able to do the classic internship, the companies don't have an opportunity to lay eyes and have those experiences with the interns?

Podlasek: Except they have hired expert people to filter out who they want. And I'm not so sure. I just don't have any firsthand experience. I'm not so sure COVID had that much influence on it because a lot of this is through LinkedIn and through word-of-mouth kind of thing.

DePue: Well, that's the classic of connections and who you know.

Podlasek: Right, well, but you don't even know anybody, And they make an offer to you. So, Apple made an offer to one of my ex-students who graduated from USC with a PhD in mechanical engineering and cognitive psychology. He was not even interested in Apple. They offered him a three-day visit to Cupertino, and they tried to hire him, made him a big offer. He now works for Jet Propulsion Laboratory because that's where he wanted to work. Iasadena because that's where his mother's family is from, and he wanted to live in Los Angeles basin. He was homeschooled through high school and his father was a schoolteacher in Illinois.

DePue: Okay, well, let's get back to a different aspect of the challenges that you would have faced in COVID, and that deals with grading of the students and testing of the students.

Podlasek: Yeah. Testing is always a problem, and based on my conversations with faculty, it is really a problem that students, at least in engineering, can have access to anything. There's no closed book exams anymore. There's no closed anything. So the students can access experts through the exam. And every once in a while that would happen to me in class, but so now it's harder to grade people. So given the problem of making up good exam questions, and given the problem of making sure they don't consult experts in the room when they're doing it remotely, now you can move them to buildings, certain testing

centers and that sort of thing, but with COVID, these testing centers are, you know, little cubicles. So I'm not so sure they got along with that.

DePue: It sounds like it's nearly impossible for you to gauge whether they actually did the work themselves? Is that what you're suggesting?

Podlasek: Well, yeah, but there's people trying. Some faculty are into this. The guy who had his office next to me, he made everybody sit at a computer, and he made them put a ladder behind them with their cellphone taped to the ladder and videotape the exam. So he said, "I got this figured out." Now, he's a guy with three sons, and he sends them to a little college at Lookout Mountain and Georgia or Tennessee. I can't remember, somewhere near Chattanooga. But he said he had it all figured out.

DePue: But still, he's spending his energy and his creativity thinking about how to defeat the students who want to cheat rather than maybe spending on something that might be more constructive to society?

Podlasek: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. So you know, there's a lot of overhead or a lot of frictional costs, I would call them, with COVID that should be gone. Our Capstone Senior Design Projects just took a beating. You couldn't do a design project, the Capstone Senior Design Project.

DePue: Because that was a hands-on kind of an experience?

Podlasek: It was a hands-on, plus, half of the project was learning to work in a corporate environment and learning what was important. All the non-technical things, the cultural things in the organization, so I did twenty-two projects at Walt Disney World. The students had to go down there, and they had to interact with the people. They had to understand the problem. Defining the problem is, you know, 70 percent of the solution. If you mis-define the problem, you misidentify the solution. You've got to define that problem the same way your client, Disney or Los Alamos Lab or John Deere or Caterpillar defines the problem. So all of that is lost with COVID. The quality of the capstone design, now, if you're doing a paper study for somebody, it doesn't matter, but they had to make an artifact. They had to build something. They had to do something.

DePue: Okay. I suspect this next one is something that you won't have a lot of comments on, and that's the impact of sports that you saw at Bradley.

Podlasek: Well, the students, you know, and the people I know, they all want to play their sports, like baseball or whatever it is. And they found ways to play. They just didn't compete. The basketball players seemed to find things, and if there's a COVID positive, then they'd end the games. So by and large, they figured it out. Wasn't the ideal situation, but they figured it out. But when you look at the financial problems of the university, the impact, which were exacerbated by COVID because there was a lot of COVID costs that sucked

into the budget as well. Where did you get that money? You either borrowed it from the endowment, you deficit spend, and that's just not sustainable. Now the government has helped tremendously making University whole regarding Covid costs. Or you cut, and sports had to be cut. You know, universities are not for profit, but they're not for loss either. So—(laughter)

DePue: I suspect that's a phrase that you didn't just invent.

Podlasek: Right. (laughter) But it really plays. Now, to a lot of faculty, it never registers. That never registers, that a university can't lose money. It just, they can't see it from a business perspective. They're still trying to wrap their heads around the concept that the university is a business.

DePue: They're fighting accepting the fact that the university is a business, is it?

Podlasek: Well, they will say in the meetings, "I still can't accept the fact." They still will deny it. They just said they can't wrap their mind around it. It's just totally impossible.

DePue: One of the things I would think is universal across the country and maybe even the world, the more you go virtual, the less you need of brick and mortar.

Podlasek: Absolutely.

DePue: And I know you've thought about this one quite a bit: how would you explain that whole dynamic?

Podlasek: Well, schools like Bradley bet on bricks and mortar. We have a $100 million new building, whizbang engineering business building where half of the building is business and half is engineering with the labs and everything where people are supposed to interact. And we're now going to have one dean who's going to be the dean of business and engineering together, and we eliminated the dean of business and the dean of engineering and have one dean. They're supposed to hire him or her. Maybe today they'll announce. I don't know. But so we've gone bricks and mortar, because the students like the on-campus experience, the 18 to 22-year-old students wanted to leave home. They wanted to be on campus. There is still, I believe, still a huge market for on-campus because of all the other things that are going on, all the other dynamics that make a university, a university. The fact that there's classes is incidental to a lot of students.

DePue: They're there for the social aspects.

Podlasek: Right. And there's so many distractions out there and so many groups and clubs, and there's more clubs than there are students. You know, everybody is doing different things. And so all of that social experience is critically important to the development of students. In the process, they're learning something about the real world, hopefully. They're learning some

fundamental skills, a skillset but also a mindset as to how to perform and how to do this. Stanford has a group on entrepreneurship where we work on the skillset and mindset that I'd participated for about ten years. You're always working both sides of the street, so to speak. And the COVID thing just doesn't allow that. I mean, you can sit in your home or on the beach. That's all right for a while, but eventually you have to interact with people. And I mean, the best decisions, the best ideas come out of a group. They don't come out of an individual where the lightbulb just turns on.

DePue: You talked about the expense of this one building especially, the joint engineering and business school. Has Bradley overbuilt, you think, in terms of their future?

Podlasek: Well, that's driven by the enrollment folks. If they can't get 1050 freshman with the proper distribution to each college, then yeah, they have overbuilt. So or 1080, I think is the number that they want.

DePue: I would think that the trend in Illinois, at least, has not been positive in that respect.

Podlasek: Well, now you're touching on the real big issue in Illinois, the net-out migration of wealthy people and the net-in migration of lower-income people. So if you look at Illinois and look at the bottom line of the first page of the income tax form of everybody in Illinois by zip code, what their income is and the history of their zip code, you can tell how many people have come in and what their net income is and how many people have left, what their net income is. And groups like the Illinois Policy Institute have been beating this drum like you can't believe, that there's a net-out migration of people from Illinois, and that's why we're losing legislative seats. But there's a net-out migration of wealthy people relative to lower-income people. So the people who are coming in are not nearly as wealthy as the people that are going out. So you're getting less tax revenue.

DePue: I just read an article I'm sure you're familiar with. Rich Miller's "Capitol Facts."

Podlasek: Oh yeah.

DePue: And he addressed this issue based on the current census numbers and made the case that the Illinois Policy Institute had been overstating the out migration. But from what you're saying, it sounds like you don't think that's necessarily the case?

Podlasek: Right. I think that in every one of these studies, there's some discretion. Any study in economics, any study in sociology, there's some discretion of which people you put in the pot and which people you don't. And if Rich Miller thinks that they overstated it, he just changed the definition a little bit. And *New York Times* does the same thing. Everybody else does it. But don't look

at the absolutes. Look at the trend lines and, you know, look at the people who graduate from schools in Illinois and where they go to work. I mean, it's a—

DePue: Okay. Next question here, probably going to struggle to figure out how to ask this. Do you see a link between some of the ideas that have been percolating in higher education over the last couple decades, issues like speech codes and politically correct speech, issues that FIRE is trying to address, some of these other things, is that finding its way into the larger context of American society?

Podlasek: Well, the portion of American society that watches the news, it is. But there's a larger percentage of people that have, in effect, turned the TV off and found new places to get the news. And that portion, I think, is growing.

DePue: But that takes us back to social media, which is, seems to me, to be reflective of what's going on in the academic world as well.

Podlasek: Well, but there are other sources, websites and things, that present different perspectives. So like for example, pick Manhattan Contrarian, which is a website out of New York City. It provides a total different perspective on New York. Provides a total perspective, different perspective on global warming, climate change.

DePue: As being skeptical or of it or support of the concept?

Podlasek: Well, it's saying that the data hasn't shown any significant change in temperature. If you look back 600 million years, the Earth has been warming and cooling, and it's driven largely by the sun. And this CO2 thing, the people who believe in it really don't believe in it. If Bill Gates thought global warming or climate change was a big deal he wouldn't have four jets. He wouldn't have five houses. If Barack Obama believed it he wouldn't have purchased his $11.4 million house on Martha's Vineyard at 10 feet above sea level right on the ocean. Because if he believed all of that, his house would be underwater eventually. So you see that a lot of these elitists who are telling the ordinary people to cut back and use electric cars and everything, their carbon footprint is huge. And they ought to cut back. Start with the governor. I mean, he flies back and forth to Wellington, Florida with his family private jet.

DePue: You're painting case though that—well, let me put it this way: the speech, the issues that, your term, the elites are pushing does have an impact on policy, or otherwise they wouldn't have to slow down behind these huge windmill blades that are being moved around the country to build all your windmills. I guess I didn't make my point. They are having an impact on policy.

Podlasek: Well, they might have an impact on policy, but it's, I mean, I don't know if it's valid. There could be a back agenda in all of this, and that is socialism and getting people to follow and be under the control and thumb of everybody. The Brexit people showed that. They resisted that. Also, just like poverty and

Afghanistan there is a lot of money to be made by the people who are politically connected and promoting climate studies.

DePue: A lot of this, I guess, is, I'm trying to get to the issue of the deep political divide that we see in the United States now, that the country seems to be pretty evenly split. And if I hear you correctly, people will gravitate to those sources of information that—

Podlasek: Support their point of view.

DePue: —support their point of view. Okay.

Podlasek: Yeah, of course. So you're going to see shifting, and shifting happens quickly in our culture right now. So who knows what people are going to be thinking a year from now. I mean, it's very difficult to predict. Now, the stock market is going gangbusters, and fortunately for the universities who have endowments, that's given them some breathing room, and Bradley's one of them.

DePue: Do the economists at Bradley think it's going to keep going that way, or are there some who predict there might be something of a setback in the stock market, in the economy?

Podlasek: You could get all perspectives of that.

DePue: I thought economics was a science?

Podlasek: Yeah, no. I mean, you can't. The global thing can change all the time. You're thinking, this COVID thing was horrible for the world economy. Maybe it was very good. I don't know. And I can't say. I'm not saying that it was or is, but, you know, people took stock of things and looked at what was important to them. And people stopped running out to restaurants and eating and started eating at home. And it's going to be pretty hard for us, Peggy and I, to start going to restaurants again because we're happy eating at home.

DePue: Well, I got to the point here where I have some concluding questions for you. And considering everything that we've been talking about, you getting to higher education and back in the 1960s as a young kid and then living your entire life in that universe except for those time periods that you were in, let's call the real world. What is the more profound change that you observed in higher education during that timeframe?

Podlasek: Well, certainly it's the quality of the students, number one, quality of the high school graduate. The number of students that are college-ready has changed. The top 10 or 20 percent of the high school graduates are just superb. They don't even need college, you know, basically. They're the kinds of Bill Gates and Paul Allens and Steve Jobs kinds of people. They learn stuff. They understand it. They connect ideas. They make the right decisions, most of the time, in terms of what people want and need. And so there's about 20 percent

of the population that, you know, they're going to do well no matter what. And there's 20 percent of the people in China and India. They're going to do very well. But start working your way down the groups, and then there's a lot of people that are being left behind. And there's more people being left behind than should be.

DePue: Is that the fault, then, of the primary and secondary education system that we've got in the country at present?

Podlasek: It's a combination of things because having lived in Chicago and seen what the things are, this whole thing with Adam Toledo getting shot really had a strong impact on me. First of all, it was close to where my grandmother ultimately moved in Chicago, but in little village or what do they call it? Little Village, I guess. But there is just no hope for the kids who grow up in that culture in Chicago. And I mean, they have to carry guns when they're ten, twelve years old, fourteen years old. And they're shooting places up, and they have to join gangs and to stay safe and stuff like that. You've got that kind of people who are just, you know, unreal. The whole gang culture and that sort of thing and the drug culture is just pervasive. The disrespect for the police, the law and order thing is horrible. I mean, how are you going to have any kind of an economy when people just start burning things down and looting and stuff? So some of these things are out of control, but the top 20 percent, they're going to live in the gated communities and do fine. So I don't know where we're headed in all of this.

DePue: Is virtual instruction here to stay, at least to a greater extent than it was before COVID?

Podlasek: For some classes it is, but it's not the total picture. I mean, if you could, we haven't talked about Khan Academy.

DePue: We did last time but only briefly.

Podlasek: Yeah, I mean, I followed that right from the get-go, from its starting point, and I would tell students to go to Khan Academy, to pick a topic, and brief yourself. None of this stuff that we cover in college, in class, is easy to assimilate the first time. So like part of mechanical engineering is thermodynamics. You've got to have three shots at it in order to understand it, at least. And you only get one. And one three-hour class or two three-hour classes. You don't get enough. And the instructor goes too damn fast. You have to go back and relearn it and rethink it through and try to relate it to something you know and that sort of thing.

DePue: Until the proverbial lightbulb comes on.

Podlasek: Right, control theory is another one. You know, how do you have an automatic pilot in a car and get it to work? And how do you think that through? What are all the mathematical models underneath of that? How good

are those mathematical models? Take the 737 Max aircraft. You have these people designed the aircraft to meet the customer's need. All of a sudden the aircraft goes unstable when you're taking off is your nose is too high and it keeps going up, and you stall. So then you say, well, we'll fix it. We'll get these computer guys to put some software in there. We'll make software fix to this thing. Well, these software guys are in India. They never have piloted an airplane in their life. They've never seen the nose go up. They've never done a purposeful stall getting their pilot's license or anything like that. They've never felt the bumps when you stall or anything. They don't know. They're just doing software. And then what happens? You get these pilots who haven't been in the military, who haven't gone through all this rigorous training to recognizing problems, they crash.

DePue: Well, it goes back to points you made a couple times here, the value of having real world experiences before you go unto the school.

Podlasek: Oh yeah, I mean, everything can't be simulation. Simulation is not the real world, whether it's a global warming model or whether it's a control model for an aircraft or it's a guidance system for a car, autonomous vehicle, you know, you can build all the models you want mathematically, but it's not the real world.

DePue: Let's move on here and ask you this question then. Let's say you had an awful lot of power in the university environment. What changes would you want to see made to improve the quality of the education students receive while there and the quality of the student when he leaves, he or she leaves?

Podlasek: Okay. First thing you have to determine is how much effort does each student or does your average student want to put in? Then you design a curriculum around that which would include practical experience, laboratory testing, and the theory, the math and the chemistry and the physics and everything. So you have to marry those kinds of concepts. So we try to do that in our capstone design where you take all of the thigs you learned, technically, and all the things you allegedly know about the real world, about how companies work and what the internal corporate cultures are, and you marry that all together and you solve a problem. And you know, that's what you would want them to do. And my sense, in talking to employers, is that they would love to have students, graduates, who knew how to package all of this together. They need this multidimensional person to do that. But to become that multidimensional persona, you have to really be committed to learning four hours a day or something like that and testing yourself. Am I learning enough today? Do I understand it? Who do I turn to if I don't understand it? How can I learn more? Could be your roommate. Could be someone else, you know. But if the student's there to party all the time, which is all right with me, I don't care, so long as he pays his bills—(laughter)

DePue: Oh, but I think you do care, Bob. (laughter)

Podlasek: But you know, but you would design it a little bit differently.

DePue: If I'm hearing you correctly, your ideal student is one who has initiative and self-discipline and is inquisitive.

Podlasek: And knows how to fail and fail forward. That every time he fails or she fails, say boy, does that feel good. I'm glad because I've learned so much in that failure. And every time they fail, they don't get discouraged. And there's some videos out on that. But you know, lots folks have failed and failed and failed and failed, and all of a sudden—but it never affects them like it affects other people. But there's this class of people, I think, that look at the future and say, "Boy, this is hopeless." I don't know how I'm ever going to survive. How am I going to live in this gated community?" And they become victims, and they become all upset and worried. Some people don't care. You know, they're happy to live on $70,000 or $50,000 a year, and they're graduates of the math and science academy, you know. And so that's fine, if that's their thing. But there's some people that want everything but aren't willing to work hard enough and develop the skills to get what they want, you know. And then there's some people that are just overachievers, Elon Musk, for example, manic-depressant, that helps him out a little bit. But so you know, I mean, you have to custom design the university to the person, I think.

DePue: Okay.

Podlasek: And then I just—one closing thing, that every year of your life you're not the same. Some years of your life you're really motivated and you're really fired up, and you really want to do something, and then you may take a break for a while. And Intel does this very well. You know, they develop a new chip for sixteen or eighteen months, and they work twelve hours a day, six days a week. And then they develop the new chip. Then they give everybody a year off or something to just recover, you know, and enjoy life.

DePue: Like a university professor who has seven-year sabbatical.

Podlasek: Right. (laughter) So there is some merit to sabbaticals, and there are some law firms that give sabbaticals. And I know some of those.

DePue: Well, your comments a couple minutes ago about failing forward, and—

Podlasek: Forward, yes.

DePue: —and we're sitting here in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library honoring a guy who knew all about failure in his life.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: And yet he now is honored as perhaps our best president.

Podlasek: Mm-hm.

DePue: So a couple more comments and then we'll be done with you, Bob.

Podlasek: Okay. (laughs)

DePue: I know you've been in the Optimist club, Optimist International for decades.

Podlasek: Right.

DePue: Do you consider yourself an optimist?

Podlasek: I do. And almost too much because I'm always telling my wife to be optimistic. And I always tell the students to be optimistic and look at the bright side of things. And you know, whatever you see, like the COVID-19, you know, this is going to be over. We could come out stronger from all of this. And will we have a method to deal with the zoonotic viruses, a better method? Absolutely. We had a good method. It only took us two or three weeks to come up with the vaccine, but it took us a long time to go through all the required tests to get it distributed.

DePue: And it's still—that all has been accomplished years and years faster than previous ones.

Podlasek: Right, and we've been studying zoonotic viruses for thirty years. We've got five groups in the United States that were funded to study zoonotic viruses. SARS was one of them. There's a guy at Vanderbilt University. Denison is his name, who's an MD and a research guy, and he's had, you know, a big lab studying zoonotic viruses for thirty years. And all these people that study it get together twice a year and compare notes.

DePue: You've had a long career, most of it in academics. What would you consider the thing you're most proud of during that career?

Podlasek: Well, from the academic point of view is finding employment for the students in this practicum program with Caterpillar where five hundred students went there. The Capstone Senior Design Projects that I developed, and there was lots of them, maybe a hundred, hundred-fifty, but twenty-two of them at Walt Disney World where I sort of thought, "There's nothing mystical about staying in Peoria. We can travel all over the country and do this." And so a lot of that. Certainly, keeping the students engaged and finding enough ideas and projects to keep students engaged. And trying to help people feel that they're not victims, that optimism—and that that's a key thing, that you can do it. Oh, so you failed. So what? What's the big deal? You know, move on. Don't get distraught about any of these things. And so those are some of the things that I would say. But in academia is to keep the flow going. You need students coming in, and students going out. You need that pipeline of incoming students to be pretty highly motivated students. And you need some of them

that aren't motivated, but all of a sudden the light turns on and they become motivated. And to see that happen is always exciting.

DePue: Well, professor, I've been grilling you for quite a while here now, probably close to six hours altogether. I'm giving you a clearly a passing grade on all of this. Do you have any closing comments for us?

Podlasek: No, I enjoyed this very much. Made me think in directions I hadn't thought before, and that's important. And I've always worried about the future—not the future of universities, but some universities are going to make it and some are not. Some universities have the leadership that is required, that's required to make it. And given the decline in high school graduates, it's going to be 25 percent by 2026. We know because of the birthrate. And given decline in the college-ready students, and given the decline in families that can afford a private education, it's going to be an interesting crash. And given the fact that the university has got so many people who sort of hate America, and how are we going to deal with those people? I mean, we've had them before, but now they're just more pervasive, I think.

DePue: And yet, you still define yourself as an optimist.

Podlasek: Right. We can handle them. I mean, in the '60s when I was at the university we had all these protests and everything. You know, I thought, this is not good, you know. We had police on horses and everything. And then I went to Berkeley to see what's really going on. My roommate and I drove out there. And I was in shock on Telegraph Avenue. You know, the way that people were behaving and then Golden Gate Park. And we were sleeping in the car and eating food, you know, free food that was in the park. You know, and I was optimistic. People could change, and things would work out. And indeed, they have. And I mean, we have the best system in the world, but the trending towards Venezuela or Venezuelan kind of socialism, get rid of all the corporations, get rid of all the people that created jobs, get rid of all the people that enforce the law, and then make sure that these elite group wins, you know, just sort of like Russia. That's probably not a good idea. The people somehow—I worked for the Fraunhofer Institute in Dresden, Germany for three years. My coworkers were all East Germans, physicists, stuff like that. They endured all of that. I couldn't live in East Germany growing up like they did. But they somehow, they were happy.

DePue: So let's sum it up this way, Bob. You're a guarded optimist. You see all the downsides, and yet, you remain optimistic?

Podlasek: Yeah, because we've covered it before. We've had all these issues before. And people are creative. And they adapt just like a farmer adapts to the weather conditions every year. But if you listen to the farmer at the coffee shop, you think the end of the world is coming. (laughter)

DePue: Okay. Let's end it with that.

Podlasek: Yeah, well, thank you.

DePue: Thank you very much.

Podlasek: I enjoyed this very much.

DePue: Great to hear.

(end of interview)