

Interview with Robert Johnson

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Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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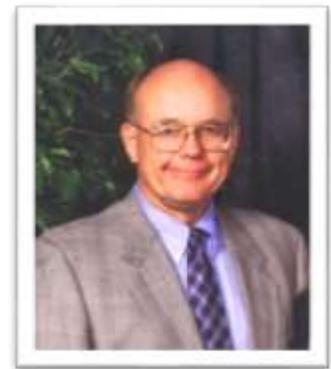
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Pogue: It's June 14th, 2013. My name is Phil Pogue. We're in DeKalb, Illinois, where we're going to be talking to Bob Johnson, related to Kishwaukee College, as part of the Presidential Library Project on Community Colleges. So we want to thank Bob for participating and representing Kishwaukee. At this time, could you give us some family background, your work experience and education?

Johnson: Sure, my family, my grandfather and my grandmother on my dad's side, emigrated from Sweden, around the turn of the century. They became farmers in Kendall County, just south of Sandwich. I was born in a hospital in Sandwich. We were farming on a rented farm, down on the Fox River.

When I was in first grade, which would be about 1950, my dad moved to another rented farm in DeKalb County, west of Sycamore. Along the years, more kids came along. There were seven of us, over the years, seven children. I'm the oldest. The youngest was born when I was in college.



Robert Johnson

I went to school at Sycamore, through ninth grade. Then we moved to the present farm, south of DeKalb, and I finished high school in DeKalb. After high school, I went to the University of Illinois, studying agricultural engineering. Stayed there for five-and-a-half years; got my masters' degree. Then [I] started work for Caterpillar Tractor Company, at that time—now it's just called Caterpillar—in Peoria.

Then, in Aurora, about 1969 or '70, my dad had a sickness one spring. And my two roommates and I helped get the crop planted. I decided, somewhere along the way there, that I'd rather be a farmer than an engineer, designing equipment. So I quit that job and started farming with my dad and have been doing that ever since.

Pogue: Your dad had some experience with Kishwaukee. What was that?

Johnson: Yes, the Illinois Community College Act in Illinois was passed, I believe, in 1967, that authorized community colleges, all through the state. There were already several community colleges in existence, but the state was not covered by community colleges. Each district—I think the districts were aligned with k-12 districts, primarily—each district had the opportunity to go to the voters and ask them, “Do you want a community college in your district?”

My dad was on that original ad hoc committee, to ask the residents of now the Kishwaukee College District—mostly DeKalb County, but several adjoining counties— “Do you want a community college? And, if so, would you support a real estate tax to help support that college?” That passed in 1967.

The next step then was to elect a board of trustees. He [Johnson's father] was on that original board of trustees of Kishwaukee College for, I think, six years or eight years, I forget, because they had staggered terms when they started.

Pogue: Did he talk to you about those starting up in the early days?

Johnson: We had some conversations. I was in graduate school when it started, so I wasn't living here. I was getting it kind of second hand. Shortly after, when I started farming, he would encourage me to help cook pork chops for the new teachers every fall. So we would set up a grill—there weren't near as many teachers back then—but we set up the grills—there weren't very many fancy buildings—but we would cook pork chops in the fall, in August or September, just before school started, when the teachers were all either coming for the first time or coming back. So that was really my first experience, other than just conversations about the college.

Pogue: And what is your current role with Kishwaukee?

Johnson: At present, I am chairman of the board of trustees. I've been a trustee; now I'm in my ninth year. Prior to that, I was on [the] Kishwaukee College Foundation Board for about twelve years.

It was an interesting transition. When my dad decided to leave the board and pass the baton to somebody else, he went [to] another farmer in the community, named Don Huftalin, that lived near the college and said, "Don, it's your turn. I'll carry your petition, but you need to run."

Don was elected, served for maybe thirty years or so. Then, about ten years ago, Don came to me and said the same thing. He says, "It's your turn. [The] baton came from your dad, and I'm passing it on to you. I'll carry your petition for you." So the three of us have held, not the same seat, but we followed one another.

Pogue: What have been the responsibilities for trustees at the local level?

Johnson: Trustees have several responsibilities by law. One is to hire and support the president; that's very important. Approve policies and budgets; we spent a lot of time working on those two items. We also are responsible to represent our district residents and our students. We bring a perspective from outside the college. We are responsible to share our skills and our perspectives.

We have former educators; we have an accountant; we have a banker; I'm a farmer. We have property, a landlord, a property owner. So, we have a whole mix of folks that are trustees. There is also a student trustee each year that brings a student perspective. Our responsibility as trustees is to bring our varied experiences and backgrounds to help guide the college.

Pogue: Have those duties changed over the years?

Johnson: Not a whole lot. The emphasis may change. When it's time to hire a president, you spend a little more time on that. But making the decisions to approve and make recommendations to how the college functions, that's really been the responsibility since day one.

Pogue: Have you had to employ a new president?

Johnson: We are on our fourth president. The other three have all retired, so we've never been in a position to ask a president to leave. The original president has passed away. They recruited him.

I remember my dad going down to Texas to recruit Dr. Lamar Fly. He retired. One of his vice-presidents, Norman Jenkins, was then hired as president. I was on a committee, the Presidential Search Committee, about, I don't know, twelve or thirteen years ago, when Norm retired, and we hired his vice-president, Dave Lewis. But we had a full-blown search committee, where we looked at probably fifty candidates.

Since I've been on the board, Dave retired, and we hired Tom Choice, Dr. Tom Choice, as our current president. He was already on staff, as well as the vice president of instruction. So, I've been involved in one, as a search committee member and one as a trustee, where we hired a president.

Pogue: What traits do you look for in a community college president?

Johnson: That's a good question. They need to be, first of all, understand education and from the community college perspective. They need to have some awareness of budgetary and hiring people. But they really need to be a people person that can work with all sorts of folks. They need a good public presence.

Our president is involved with all sorts of public activities. He's really the face of the college with our taxpayers, our students and donors to a foundation, as we strongly encourage private donations from businesses and people to the foundation, to help support the mission of our college. [He] needs to be able to work with a board well. A good parallel, I guess, would be, a good juggler in a circus might make a good president, because you have to be a master of many traits.

Pogue: Going to your experience with the foundation, you said you were there for twelve years. What is the foundation?

Johnson: The foundation is kind of a sister organization to the college. It's a group of community folks that volunteer their time to serve on the board, and they raise funds for scholarships and for capital improvements, perhaps, at the college, to enhance things we don't have funds to do, through tax dollars or tuition.

For example, many years ago, the college built a new library, learning resource center, I think, is the proper term. But there were not enough funds in the budget for books and some furniture and a number of things. This is probably thirty years ago. The community raised, at that time, a lot of money, roughly \$700,000, to outfit the library. So the taxpayers provided the space, and private donors filled the space with the necessary furniture and books.

There's several hundred thousand dollars a year of scholarships that are awarded by the foundation. They enhance some learning programs. This last year, the foundation bought some Fire readers [a brand of electronic reading tablets] to be used for adult education classes, things that we don't have the funds for necessarily, but they can support the college through private fundraising.

Pogue: Is the foundation structured?

Johnson: It is structured. It has a board of directors. It has an executive director and, I think, one full-time or one part-time staff. This week they held a golf outing, which we learned Tuesday night, they raised probably thirty some thousand

dollars toward scholarships, through a golf outing that 120 some community members participated in.

They do a fall dinner, a nice dinner with some speakers and a program that raises funds for the foundation. And there are a number of private donors. In fact, my family has established a scholarship in the name of my father, for example. Many others have done the same thing.

Pogue: You said you were on that foundation for twelve years. How did that help you with moving into the trustee position?

Johnson: I learned a lot about the college, just being there, being involved in all the things that happened at the college. So it was kind of a natural transition, although it's not real common. There aren't a lot of foundation board members that become trustees, but it's helped me hit the ground running, if you will.

Pogue: What have been some of the major events that have taken place at Kishwaukee during your tenure?

Johnson: Well, there are several. Our college, we formed a committee of community members, trustees and faculty and staff, to look at our campus. We had grown. We had doubled our student enrollment—this was all done about four years ago—we had doubled our student enrollment. We hadn't built any facilities for over ten years, and we were bursting at the seams. Our students lacked space to do much of the things they needed to do.

So, we had a planning committee that looked at what the needs were. Then we contracted with a firm to develop what's called a "campus master plan." Several of us were on that committee, along with other folks, as well. We looked at how our other community colleges have built. For example, parking lots, access to parking. What sort of buildings do they have? What sort of square feet per student? A whole list of things we considered.

Through that process, we developed a campus master plan that said, here's where our roads will be; here's where parking will be. If we build buildings at some point in the future, here's where they would be located. Here's where our athletic fields would be. Then, following that, we went to our voters—[that] will be three years ago this November—and laid out that plan in front of them, and said, "Here's what we need; we think we need. If you would support that...(interruption; conversation in the background.)"

So, in November of 2010, we went to the voters in our district and asked them if they would support continuing the same tax rate that we'd had after prior referendums, to build the things that we had identified that were needed on our campus. They passed that, even in the middle of a tough economic climate, sixty-two point some percent, yes.

That opened the door to lots of construction. We had our plans in place. Then we needed to actually have architects draw the detailed plans. We built the new student center. That opened almost a year ago, not quite a year ago. We are remodeling a lot of space inside present buildings, into new classrooms and new science labs. We built a new campus operations building, which all the maintenance people, the copy center, the mail center is all kind of at the backside of the campus, because we really didn't have room for that in the main campus.

[We] tore down some of the old, original, temporary buildings. We built new parking. We needed to move the baseball field, because the campus operations building was built where the baseball field was. A new ring road, we call it, around [the] campus, so access to campus is...Cars go around the outside, come in and park. Then, the pedestrians, the students, can walk towards the campus. So, totally changed the look of the campus, keeping most of the same buildings, with remodeling and two new buildings. That's been a major effort over the last couple years, which will be finished next spring, spring of 2014.

Pogue: Following up with what you mentioned, first of all, on referendums you indicated that one passed to create the college, and you had that successful referendum to do the building issues. Have there been other referendums that have been brought up at Kishwaukee?

Johnson: Yes, that was the original, to build the college. Then there was a referendum, which I wasn't aware of until I did some homework. But, in 1972, there was a failed referendum to increase the educational fund. Apparently the trustees went back to the voters the following year, and it passed, 81% yes. Then, in '86, there was a referendum that passed for more buildings. In 1990 another one passed. In 2000 there was another one passed, and in 2010 we passed the most recent one.

Now, all these recent referendums, our prior boards of trustees did not go to the voter until the bonds would be paid off from the prior referendum. So the theory was, we're not asking for a new, increased tax rate; we're asking you to continue the same tax rate that you've had for many years. We'll borrow the money; we'll pay the bonds off, and then we'll come to you and ask you to support the next construction project.

Pogue: As to the temporary buildings that you said you tore down, how old were those temporary buildings?

Johnson: They were built in 1968; there are still some of them there. They've remodeled and repurposed. There's a childcare center that was a classroom at some point. It's been remodeled and repurposed, and it works quite well. So there are still a few of them around, some storage buildings, but nothing used for education.

We have a clinic on campus that works with NIU [Northern Illinois University]; it's called Tri-County Health Care, but I think they're going to get a new name pretty soon. But, there's a clinic for lower income folks can come to campus and go to the clinic, as well. And that's in one of the older buildings.

Pogue: Well, let's go a little bit back to the history. Could you describe the boundaries of Kishwaukee College?

Johnson: (coughing) Excuse me. Yes, Kish College, actually it's Kishwaukee College. Some of the colleges say "community college;" other's just say "college." People get confused sometimes. We had someone donate a car for our police science class. They had it painted, Kishwaukee Community College, on the side. We had to politely redo that, take the name "community" off of the college.

But, as I understand it, the original district was set up to coincide with k-12 districts, in general. So we have Sycamore, DeKalb, Rochelle, Indian Creek, which used to be Waterman and Shabbona, before they were consolidated a number of years ago. We have Paw Paw, and we have parts of Ogle County, which would be Oregon, but we don't have all of that. I'm not sure exactly why we don't have a complete district, but we have pieces of, I think, seven counties. All of those... There used to be a multi-school district, too. That's been consolidated with DeKalb.

Pogue: Have any of the boundaries changed since '68?

Johnson: I'm not aware of any changes. I think they were set up when the state law passed, and someone—I assume in Springfield—decided where the districts would be. Then you were told what your district would be, and you had the opportunity to either pass a voters' referendum, "Do you want a community college or not?" I'm not aware we had any choice in what our district would be.

Pogue: How did the name Kishwaukee come about?

Johnson: If you've spent any time in DeKalb area, there are a lot of things named Kishwaukee, but named after the river that flows. It originates in DeKalb County, and it flows northward and joins the Rock River near Rockford. Then the water turns around and heads back south and joins the Mississippi at Rock Island.

So, there's a Kishwaukee Hospital; there's Kishwaukee Archers; there's Kishwaukee College'; there's... If you look in the phone book, there are a lot of things named Kishwaukee. So our original trustees, I guess, decided, we may as well have a Kishwaukee College.

Pogue: Now the college is located in the Malta area. How did that come about?

Johnson: Well, my mother tells me my dad lobbied for that very strongly. It's about in the middle of our district. They bought a 120 acre farm back then for a \$1,000 an acre, back in '67 or '68. If you look on a map, it's just about in the geographic center of the district.

Pogue: What have been some of the biggest challenges facing the community college during your tenure as a trustee or even as your experience as a foundation member?

Johnson: Always one of the challenges is funding. When the act was passed, the theory was that there would be a three-legged financial support for the college. One leg would be state support, roughly a third; one leg would be real estate taxes, and one leg would be student tuition. The state has been busily sawing off its leg for many years, and the leg has gotten shorter and shorter. Now it's about 17% or 18%, about half what it was originally. So it's always a challenge, particularly in Illinois, where funding continues to decline for education.

Other challenges have been just dealing with the influx of students. A real on-going challenge for all community colleges, nationwide, is college readiness of our incoming students. We try to work very hard with our local school districts to encourage their graduates to be ready to do college work. But probably two-thirds of all incoming freshman are not ready to do college level math, for example. That's a challenge for the entire United States; it's just not Kish College.

Pogue: You mentioned that part of the strategy on referendums was to not change the tax rate. How has that rate changed since the time the college began in the '60s?

Johnson: Well, our original happened to have a levy from 1967. An original levy was .125, which is dollars per hundred, I believe. Then there was a referendum, a few years later. That went up to about .24, total levy. Some of that depends on the bond and interest fund. There were years when the bonds were paid off, when the total levy dropped. But it's typically run... Currently, the total levy is about just under .6, .593. That's been pretty flat for, probably, close to twenty years.

Pogue: What have been the major laws, federal, state or local, that have had impact upon the college?

Johnson: Of course we work under the Community College Act, so that gets amended pretty regularly by the Illinois legislature. That spells out lots of details on how the college functions. We have what's called the Illinois Community College Board that oversees us directly, which is part of, reports to the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

Illinois likes to do—and other states, as well, I suppose—but do unfunded liabilities. They require us, for example, to give free tuition to

veterans. However, they used to fund those, and they no longer fund those. So that becomes an unfunded mandate from the state. That's a law. We certainly have no problem supporting our veterans, but it would be nice if funding came, commensurate with the responsibility.

There are many laws to deal with. After the tragedy at Northern [Illinois University]¹ about five years ago, the shooting, there are laws that deal with student security and security on campus.

We have a contract with our local DeKalb County Sheriff's Department that provides our security on campus. There are police officers on campus. Whenever the campus is open, we have one, two or three police officers, full-time, on campus to provide security. Some of that's related to recent laws, after the NIU tragedy.

And there are laws, lots of laws to deal with, how you deal with employees and how you deal with your unions—so we have a law firm that's on retainer that keeps us on our toes—Open Meeting Act laws, Freedom of Information Act laws.

Pogue: Now there are a couple of issues that are doing fairly new, that have been in the papers. As chairman, you're probably dealing with the cost shift on pensions, the healthcare law. How are those impacting the college?

Johnson: Well, the cost shift on pensions... I'm on a state committee that has dealt with that, College Trustee Committee. We went to the legislature and said... Let me step back. When I became a trustee, one of the things that amazed me was to learn, early on, that we were not responsible for the employer contribution for our employees' pensions.

Now most everyone else in the country, in our own business, we are responsible to pay our employer share of our employees' Medicare and Social Security. If we have a pension plan—which we do for our employees—we make the employer's contribution to that. Colleges and universities and k-12s in Illinois, for some reason that I've never had explained to me, the state says, "You don't have to worry about making your employers' contribution. We'll do it for you."

So that's led to some, what I would say, maybe not the best decision-making on boards of education. It's not uncommon for someone to get pretty significant raises in their last three or four years of employment, before they retire, which builds up their pension. The money to pay that pension doesn't

¹ On February 14, 2008, at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. Steven Kazmierczak opened fire with a shotgun and three pistols in a crowd of students on campus, killing five students and injuring an additional seventeen people, before fatally shooting himself. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Illinois_University_shooting)

come from the local school district or college district. It comes from, in theory, from someone else. So it's easy to spend other people's money.

We realized, as college trustees, statewide, that that could not continue, to pass that baton. And we were told by folks in Springfield that, "We want to put the whole load on you, Mr. Community College Trustee. We want you to take over all the employer's contribution, immediately." We decided and realized that would be devastating to our budgets, to have all of a sudden a 7% or 8% or 9% of our payroll added to our cost in one year. We came up with a proposal that we have brought forward to give us some lead-in time and then a phase-in of us of taking over the on-going cost of our employees' pensions.

Pogue: As you look at that particular phase-in, how much money are you talking about, when it's fully implemented, and where is the funding source for that?

Johnson: That's going to be a challenge. Hopefully, if the state becomes a bit more solvent, by not having to make their contribution, that state payments can begin to increase again. That would be one source. We're hopeful that our EAV, [the] equalized assessment valuation of our real estate, will quit its decline and level out and perhaps increase.

Student tuition is something that we can set. But what we're doing a lot of, on our college, is looking very hard at every expense, every expenditure, every cost. How can we be as efficient as absolutely possible? So it will be a challenge; it will be very difficult. But we do have some fund balance that we may devote some of that towards this. It's going to be a very big challenge, but I see it as an inevitable challenge. We can't continue to do business the way we always have.

Pogue: What about the healthcare law?

Johnson: That's another challenge, the new Affordable Care Act. The implications for community colleges are that you're edge on faculty, part-time faculty, part-time employees, coaches, perhaps, for athletic teams, if they work more than thirty hours equivalent per week, more than a 75% employee, then we would need to put them on our campus healthcare plan. We have many adjuncts, many part-time instructors that would totally devastate our budget, so we are being very careful on the hours that are being assigned to individual, part-time teachers and employees.

We intend to continue coverage for our full-time employees that have historically been full-time employees, but we're very careful about not adding to that list, because we just simply can't afford it.

Pogue: When you talk about affording it, what are the new rules that would, perhaps, make changes in what the college has done before?

Johnson: Well, it appears that our ongoing healthcare, health insurance plan—We're self-insured; we have a self-insured plan, where we—the large claims are covered by an insurance company, but we put funds into a fund and pay the claims out of that, below a certain point. We can continue that without any major changes in the future. It's just, if we had to add a whole lot of people to that, we don't have the funds to sustain that.

Pogue: What is Kishwaukee known for?

Johnson: Well, besides our volleyball team—Our ladies' volleyball team has done extremely well nationally. I think they've had three years in a row of national championships—I think what we're really known for is being fiscally responsible to our community. Our community knows that their tax dollars that go to Kishwaukee, our tuition dollars, are going to be spent responsibly.

When a business in our community needs people trained... For example, there's a new rail car manufacturing, a Japanese owned company, in Rochelle, which is just a few miles down the road. They had a need for welders, trained welders, to work in their plant. We can set up a program. We bought some new, specialized welding equipment to train people. We can get that set up and running very quickly.

We're noted for being responsive to the needs of our district. We, for example, feel that our graduates... We're told by universities that our graduates that transfer to universities are fully prepared to take on college level work, four-year, college level work. The businesses in our community that hire our graduates... We have a very good diesel power technology program. Many of those graduates go to work for implement dealers, farm implement dealers, or truck dealers. They're ready to go to work when they're hired. So I think we're noted for delivering on what we're supposed to deliver on. And I think it's clear to everyone that we really care about our students succeeding.

Pogue: Now you have a role with the trustee association?

Johnson: Yes, actually in a couple of, I'll be president of the state association. I started going to a meeting early on, in my term as a trustee. I figured I need to find out what this was about. I remember going to a meeting in Champaign, my first meeting, and sitting in on some things. Then one thing leads to another, and you get involved in... It is an outstanding organization that cooperates with all the various community colleges in the state. Almost all are very fully involved in it.

No trustees are paid to be a trustee or to go to state meetings or anything. Our expenses can be covered, but there's no per diem or remuneration of any sort. And there are folks who have been going to community college trustee meetings for... One gentlemen, it's past thirty-five

years. They're fully involved; they contribute; they help teach new trustees the ropes. We speak with one voice in Springfield.

We've been the leaders on cost shifting. The universities kind of sat in the back of the room, and the powers that be in Springfield—Speaker Madigan and others—listen to the community college trustees' proposal, which was much more thought out and much more realistic than some of the other things that were on the table. So, it's a very strong organization, staffed by a good staff. But the key is the involvement of many, long-term trustees that have contributed greatly to their schools and to our state.

Pogue: Being in that group, what have you learned about the state-wide community college system?

Johnson: We do something called a "trustee roundtable" at many of our meetings, where we sit around the table and talk about topics that the trustees want to talk about. Each trustee gets a chance to share. It's kind of amazing how we... We work under the same law, but we tend to do things on our own campuses a bit differently. For example, some boards of trustees have a good, active committee structure. They have an audit committee and a finance committee, perhaps, and committees... We have an executive committee on ours.

Other colleges want to do everything as a committee of the whole, different ways of doing the same thing. I just learned one college has very extensive meetings to determine who they're going to hire for their staff positions. Other colleges tend to take the recommendation of staff that does the search and hires who they recommend. So we learn from each other, what works and what doesn't work on our various campuses, how we get along with our committees, with our students, with our presidents. It's a great sharing opportunity.

We also get legal updates, periodically. The Open Meetings Act and Freedom of Information are always topics of interest. How do we run our colleges legally and correctly? So, [it's] a great chance to learn from each other.

Pogue: How has the college expanded its communication with the high schools in the area?

Johnson: We had a retreat. Our campus, our board had a retreat a couple of years ago, and as I think I said earlier, we have challenges with incoming students being prepared to do college level work. Over the years we've started some longitudinal data studies, with several of our k-12 districts, where we will track their graduates who come to our college and combine the data from their high school and their college careers to look at things like course taking patterns... Did they take math as a senior or not? Did they take English as a

senior or not? Or did they take their senior year and say, “I’ve got my requirements done. I don’t want to study so hard my senior year.”?

Students who do that and get to college, they have a real challenge getting back up to speed with their math and their English and their reading. So we’re trying very hard to pass that information back to the schools, who can then pass it to their students, to the students’ parents and even to the middle schools, “If you take these courses in this sequence, you’re much more likely to have success in college.”

We have also made a point to meet with k-12 boards in our district. We go to one of their board meetings. Our board goes and just has a conversation with them, gets to know them a bit. We’ve done three of our districts. We’ve got one set up for next month and a couple more to go, where we will just reach out to those districts of to tell them, “We’re dealing with... Almost half your students will end up at our college, within the first two years after graduation. So we have a lot in common to make sure those students are successful.”

Pogue: As to the four-year institutions, obviously, being in DeKalb, you’ve got Northern Illinois University. How are those relations?

Johnson: The majority of our graduates, who go on to a four-year school... Now understand, many of graduates are there for a certificate to allow them to be a nurse, to be a radiologist, to fix diesel engines. They’re not going to a four-year school. But those who are going to transfer, the vast majority go to NIU.

We have a very good relationship with NIU, in that respect. Our pre-engineering program, or engineering program, has been so successful that the University of Illinois has told us, “If your students take these courses, this course sequence, and they pass with a—I think a 3.2 average—we will automatically admit them to the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois as a junior.” They really like our graduates. They don’t have to apply and hope. If they meet these requirements, they have a spot. And the College of Engineering, which was my college at U of I, is one of the top five in the country, in terms of their reputation, the rankings of engineering schools. So, it’s a very good engineering school, and they like our graduates.

Other schools... Most of what our students do, if they’re successful at Kish, they do quite well at their final two years, wherever that is.

Pogue: Have there been any other challenges, operating a community college outside of a major city... you mentioned about the sheriff’s department with security?

Johnson: Not a lot. We’re a college in a cornfield, if you will. There’s corn fields across the roads. Challenges are always to hire and retain good staff. The funding, as I said earlier, the funding is always a challenge. I don’t see that ever ending. There’ll be a challenge to have adequate funding and to use it wisely. The

challenge, which I've also mentioned, of getting our incoming students ready to do college level work.

We have a general concern for our students. We do provide a lot of financial aid, but a lot of that is in the form of student loans. That's a concern to all of us, that those students who are borrowing money... Some of them don't really understand what it means to have pay that back. You try to explain it to them, but that's a challenge, that we would rather our students didn't have to borrow as much as some of them do.

Pogue: Now you talked about the property tax rates and the decline of state funding. What about the tuition rates for students, and how has that gone?

Johnson: They're higher than I would like them to be. We're below the mean, in the State of Illinois, but it's still a challenge because, as I said earlier, the three-legged stool of financial support has made it difficult, when one of those legs keeps getting shorter. But our tuition started in the first year at \$6.00 a credit hour. This coming year, starting this summer session, which in progress now, tuition and fees will be a \$113. Four dollars of that was added to help build the student spaces in the new student center. So we borrowed some money and dedicated the \$4.00 per credit hour towards paying those bonds off, as part of the referendum process. So, we are higher than we'd like to be. We are below, as I said, below the state average, but that's what it costs us to deliver the quality of education that we do.

Pogue: As a chairman of the board, how do you get information about how to set your tuition rate?

Johnson: We look at what's being done elsewhere in the state. We look at our budgets very closely. We look at what can we not spend that people would like. There's a whole list of capital items, additional staff, things that would allow us to do a better job of delivering the education we do, but, unfortunately, we can't afford all of that. So, particularly this year and next year, many things that were desirable, that would have enhanced our ability to serve our students, are not on the list of things that were approved or will be approved, going forward.

Pogue: Are there special grants from the state and federal sources that Kishwaukee is taking advantage of?

Johnson: There are some. There are workplace training grants; it's not a huge part of our budget. Our students receive Pell Grants. They don't come directly to the college, but it helps students pay for their education. There's Pell Grants, federal grants, that is a significant amount of dollars in Pell Grants. The State of Illinois has what's called MAP Grants, Monetary Award Program Grants. Those, unfortunately, are kind of level funded, but the need keeps growing. So, every year those grants are gone earlier and earlier and earlier. Many of

our students don't decide to enroll until summer, and the grants have all been awarded by then. So, those are funds that help our students.

And there are some minor grants. There was a recent federal grant that several community colleges... Workforce Investment Act Grants, that a number of community colleges—I think ten or twelve of us, led by Harper College—are participating in that. That helps us train people for particular employment and particular industries. I believe we were told Tuesday night that over twenty-one months we're getting something like \$400,000 for that particular grant, which was an increase from prior years. But that's targeted to train people to work in particular industries.

Pogue: Over the next five years, what are going to be the major challenges facing the college? You talked about some of these, with state funding issues, some of the potential with the cost shift and the health care law; are there others?

Johnson: We have a huge concern that the pension problems in Illinois, some of the solutions that are proposed may encourage our longer term employees to do a mass exodus. It may encourage them. We don't know this, but we're concerned with the possibly. Some of our more senior staff may decide, "I don't like what's coming down the pike. That may impact my pension. I'm going to retire." We're concerned about that. There's a lot of institutional memory in the heads, in the minds and the history of those long-term employees that we have a concern we may lose. So that's one of those that may happen. We don't know for sure what will come out of all of that. That would be a big one that I haven't already covered.

Pogue: You talked, I think, about the strategic plan. Is there anything else that we needed to talk about the plan or the mission statement?

Johnson: I carry this when I go to meetings. (clears his throat) Excuse me. Our mission, which we developed... About five years ago we had a very intensive strategic planning process. We updated it a year or so ago. Last year we approved it, as a board. Our mission that we arrived at five years ago was as follows, "At Kishwaukee College, we are passionate about enhancing lives and fulfilling dreams. We provide excellent, innovative and affordable education in a welcoming environment to learners who can benefit from diverse programs and services." We worked long and hard on that mission statement, to put things in there that we really believed in. And we didn't change it this last time. We felt that it reflected what our mission was.

Pogue: What has been the relationship with the college and the community? You talked about community support on referendums and the large support for the foundation.

Johnson: I feel we have a very, very strong relationship with our community residents. I've always wondered, if you could line all of the 110,000 of our district

residents up and ask them, “How many of you have either taken a class or someone in your family has taken a class or gotten a degree or certificate from Kishwaukee College?” I suspect almost all the hands would go up. We are a part of this community. My wife took a class, learning how to make baskets, for example. She and I took a ballroom dance class, which fortunately they didn’t grade, or we would have failed.

To careers, to all the nursing graduates we graduate every year, who find good employment, to training EMTs and paramedics, to working with local fire departments to train those folks, to criminal justice, to...I mean the list goes on and on and on of the ways we train people for jobs in our community. So, it’s really very strong. The fact that the referendum’s passed is kind of a measuring stick. But the people that show up for campus events, for graduation, for fundraisers for the foundation, I’ve not ever heard anyone say anything bad about, or negative about, Kish College.

Pogue: Well, before we get to our final question, you are now the chairman of the trustees, here at the local level. What are the duties of the chairman?

Johnson: Well, I remind new trustees that none of us have any authority outside of the board room. We are citizens who are elected. Our authority comes when we meet as a group. We convene a meeting and make decisions that affect the college. None of us have any authority outside of that.

But the job of the chairman is to kind of to interface with the president and the board. He will call me, or I’ll call him periodically, just to talk over things. Anything of significance gets to the board of trustees, at the next meeting, or in some fashion. We don’t run the college together, but...And then to run meetings in an efficient way, to make sure the rules are followed, that meetings are conducted according to *Robert’s Rules of Order*, according to the laws of the state that affect community colleges. In some ways, to be a bit of the face of the college for public events. I don’t know, that just kind of sums the way I look at it, to be not out front, necessarily. I’m not the college. My job is to kind of reach consensus, help us all reach consensus in the direction we all want to move. But it’s not to make those decisions individually.

Pogue: Our final question is, where do you see this college going, over the next decade?

Johnson: That’s a very good question. We’ve positioned ourselves quite well, with our building project, our bonds, our twenty year bonds, so there will be no major building projects for a long time. We are, though, positioned well, with the new facilities, to meet the needs of our students that will be coming to us over the next time.

So our real challenge is to keep doing what we've been doing for forty plus years, forty-five years now, roughly, be responsive to the needs of our community, be out there; be part of our community. Our employees and our trustees are active in their communities. And to meet the needs of whatever they are. There'll be something different coming down the road, but whatever the needs of our community, that we can address, that's [what] our job is, to do that.

Pogue: As we're closing, what do you feel the role of the community college is in Illinois?

Johnson: We have roughly a million students that take classes at our community colleges. We are, state-wide, an integral part of all our communities. Our businesses rely on our community colleges. Our universities increasingly rely on transfer students from community colleges. We can help students graduate with much less debt, much less cost, if they do two years at a community college. Studies show that our graduates that go to a four-year school and finish—if you equalize out things like SAT scores or ACT scores—they do just as well as students that start at a four-year school.

Many, many families are realizing that there's a real cost advantage to doing two years or one year at a community college and then transferring. So our role is to be an integral part of the economy of the State of Illinois. I think we are doing that and doing it very effectively.

Pogue: Well, Bob, I want to thank you for explaining the role of Kishwaukee and your family's involvement, since the formation and also your role in the Trustee's Association, down in Springfield.

Johnson: You're most welcome. It's been an interesting process that you're doing.

(end of interview)