

## DU ORAL HISTORY 1984-2014

**Interviewee:** Dwight M. Smith

**Interviewer:** James R. Griesemer

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Transcriber: Terry L. Zdrale

James Griesemer: [00:21](#)

Welcome to the University of Denver's oral history. Our series begins in the mid 1980's when DU was literally on the brink of bankruptcy. It continues to 2014 with the university poised for national academic prominence, balanced with a strong commitment to serving the public good. The interviews in this series present a panorama of progress against steep odds. It's a remarkable series of stories told by men and women who were personally involved in saving the university and undertaking an extraordinary process of renewal. Their narratives are a true renaissance tale. So let's begin the story. Joining me is Dr. Dwight Smith, former chancellor of the University of Denver. Dr. Smith has had a distinguished academic career as a teacher, researcher, author, and administrator. He joined the University of Denver in 1972 as a professor and chair of the chemistry department coming to DU from Wesleyan University. He served as vice chancellor of academic affairs for the University of Denver in 1982 and 83 and was then named DU's chancellor in January of 1984. Dwight Smith. Welcome to DU's oral history.

Dwight Smith: [01:48](#)

Pleased to be involved. Thank you.

James Griesemer: [01:50](#)

Our oral history covers, as you know, a period of about 30 years, which actually begins in 1984 with your appointment as chancellor. So I'd like to set the stage for this series by asking you to describe just what DU was facing at the time. You've described it as a perfect storm. Could you tell us about that?

Dwight Smith: [02:11](#)

That description I think was accurate. , the whole sequence of events as it turns out, was prompted by construction. , the university had built first the new student center it had contracted to buy, actually was in the process of building the current Seeley Mudd building. And, it had received information from the delegation accrediting the law school that some changes were desperately needed there. More and higher quality space, expansion of the law library was necessary and so on. So the administration, the previous administration was faced with dealing with that and knowing where in the world they could construct a suitable building for the college of law. It turns out that the boards of University of Denver and the Colorado Women's College had been negotiating about the transfer of assets from Colorado Women's college that had run into serious financial problems to the University of Denver.

Dwight Smith: [03:53](#)

With that transfer, of course would come space where we could build a law school a new law school and also housed the departments of music and theater, a very fine facility. And, so that transfer of assets occurred. Colorado Women's college became part of the University of Denver. And, the construction of the law building, the new law building named, by the way, after a noted alumnus was proceeding, unfortunately, it was about that time that the economy in Denver took a real nosedive. Not only that, but the university had learned that the distribution of assets from a bequest of one of our alums, would not to be what it was presumed to be. And so the question was, having built two buildings with a, of course associated costs and a commitment for a new law structure, where would the funding come from?

Dwight Smith: [05:35](#)

Just to give you an example, the current law school, current at the time was just to the south of the civic center. It contained in two smaller buildings and the sale price for those buildings was judged to be about \$13 million dollars. Literally within months,

the value of those buildings plummeted to about half that value,

James Griesemer: [06:08](#)

but you were already moving forward, right?

Dwight Smith: [06:10](#)

Yeah. So that really created some serious problems. Ultimately it led to debt, which was another problem. The university had indebtedness of about \$40 million of which 30 million was due in December of the year I was appointed. And of course there was no possible way the university could cover that. Complicating all of this was the fact that our enrollment had begun to slide. The principal reason was a rather disastrous set of decisions as to leadership and process in the admissions department.

Dwight Smith: [07:01](#)

Once that decline started, the media picked up the information, that the university was having some financial problems and of course that, the feedback of that had a considerable effect also on the enrollment management. Beyond that, the university, like most universities had significant level of deferred maintenance. That's the one thing that's common throughout higher education. I believe. Ours was perhaps a little more than the average. So we had that problem and as I say, the indebtedness had mushroomed due to some of the building projects and the need to recover the funding. So all in all, if you take this series of events, all of which happened in a very short period of time, there was in fact a perfect storm of kind of negative news.

James Griesemer: [08:14](#)

That's a good description of what was going on. Well, given the difficult environment that DU was facing. And now, the board asks you to be the chancellor.

Dwight Smith: [08:25](#)

Yes.

James Griesemer: [08:26](#)

I guess two questions. One was going into the job. What was your perspective about sort of what you were facing? And then secondly, what was your

charge from the board of trustees? What did they ask you to do?

- Dwight Smith: [08:38](#) Alright, well, my perspective was based upon a 12 years as a department chair, but importantly, six, a part of a year, at least six months or so as academic vice chancellor. And it became very clear to me looking at these problems associated with, with the situation at the time that probably nothing short of creating a new creating and implementing a new product will be required.
- James Griesemer: [09:22](#) My Gracious,
- Dwight Smith: [09:23](#) I personally felt that from the information that I had and as far as the charge the board had, they asked me to present to them a plan within six months to improve the university's financial well-being.
- James Griesemer: [09:51](#) That's a pretty tall order. Let's, let's talk about this because universities are complex places. They're not like a private business where the CEO can say, do this and it happens. So maybe a couple of questions. First of all, how did you decide what to do? What, what informed the plan? What, how, what, how did you gather the basic information?
- Dwight Smith: [10:15](#) All Right. If I could begin by saying that one of the first things that I think needed to be done was to share the realities of the university's situation with the entire university community. And so we had an all university convocation I think a month after I became the chancellor or maybe two months and laid out such issues as the deficits the university was running, the indebtedness, which was a major problem. And, what was apt to transpire as we studied and made decisions and some of the things that, that were going to be necessary. Were a faculty and staff layoffs and probably salary moratoriums for a while.
- James Griesemer: [11:26](#) Now. Did you mention that or was that something that you discovered later? At the early meeting

- Dwight Smith: [11:31](#) That's I mentioned upfront based on my assessment, because the purpose of this meeting was to tell them who I was and what I thought we faced and that I felt we needed to share that with the community.
- James Griesemer: [11:47](#) That's a difficult thing to do.
- Dwight Smith: [11:50](#) Oh, indeed. Secondly, as a way to prepare for this, what you've asked me to respond to, I felt having been enraged somewhat by an opinion, editorial by a well-known legislator that the university really needed to join the public sector.
- James Griesemer: [12:19](#) Oh, my.
- Dwight Smith: [12:20](#) Effectively give itself, become a state institution in order to solve its problems. And anyone who's been in private education, as long as I have bristles at that notion. Anyway, there was a solution I felt and that was to put in the hands of a very competent economics group, the question of what the university's impact was, financial impact, on the community,
- James Griesemer: [12:59](#) Ah, sort of the value to the community and economic.
- Dwight Smith: [13:01](#) What is the value in financial terms of this university to the community? We had that study done and all of us were, I would say, shocked by the impact that the University of Denver has on the community. That was of course widely circulated to the bankers and foundation community. And I would have to say that they reacted quickly and positively in terms of at least getting appointments with the bank president, whomever. So that was the, that was the start.
- James Griesemer: [13:44](#) So in, if I'm hearing you correctly in a sense, instead of treating this is just an internal DU problem, you really brought it as a community issue and an opportunity probably.
- Dwight Smith: [13:59](#) Correct.

- James Griesemer: [14:00](#) Very interesting.
- Dwight Smith: [14:01](#) I felt that if we were going to succeed, we needed community support.
- James Griesemer: [14:07](#) That was very interesting. And so, you used consultants. Did you, did you keep, I'm sure you kept the board briefed as you were going along, at some point, did you bring them together and say, here's what we're thinking, here's the plan, or how did that emerge?
- Dwight Smith: [14:27](#) The first thing I told them and told the community was that you cannot solve a problem in the timeline that's required. And to the extent we need to gather information for appropriate decisions, we have to do several study processes in parallel.
- James Griesemer: [14:50](#) Oh, alright.
- James Griesemer: [14:51](#) You can't say, well, let's solve this problem, then we'll move onto the next. We had to do this in parallel. And so we created a series of committees that were staffed by leaders in the academic community at DU. One was called a select committee whose role was to assess the information that came in and kind of integrate everything and come to come to some recommendations. One was a program review committee, that of course sent signals of alarm, but we really needed to know and we let each department, each unit, assess this for themselves. What is their quality? These are the other institutions. What is their centrality? Do they really fit the mission of the university as we know now? Is it, are the costs and the university's resources sufficient to continue to pursue those areas? And what is the probable demand for the product, the student product that we generate?
- James Griesemer: [16:26](#) Now, one could think that, the answers to such questions could be self-serving.
- Dwight Smith: [16:32](#) Of course.

James Griesemer: [16:35](#)

How did a) I guess the departments and units respond and b) what was the test against reality to their responses?

Dwight Smith: [16:45](#)

The sense of reality was we had a series of consultants, very good people, I'd have to say. A group that had a previous contract with the university to help the board and the chancellor at some time previous called Institutional Strategy Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts and the people that were given to us to help with this assessment and, and direction in a way, were from institutions like Penn State, Chicago, Stanford, Berkeley, and the head of Institutional Strategy Associates. And they were of enormous help. And I have to tell you that I was somewhat surprised that the self-serving aspect really didn't show very seriously for any of those cases. Normally people would say, boy, our department is really in the top drawer. And in most cases where that wasn't true, that came through in the study.

James Griesemer: [18:08](#)

Well, to the credit of the folks, those studies. How interesting. And, and then as this process proceeded, was there a, I'm talking about the planning dimension. Was there a culmination then at some point with the board, you've, you've talked to lots of people, you've put committees together, you've used very wisely, it sounds like consultants who, who had a lot of experience. How did that then sort of come together for the board? What did you, how did you bring that to the board or what happened?

Dwight Smith: [18:38](#)

We when all the data were assimilated and we'd discussed it with the consultants and put it in a presentable form. We asked a group of university leaders, Faculty leaders, administrative leaders, two or three trustees, I think the chair of the board and a couple of others attended and we headed for the mountains for, for three days and the closeted ourselves a kind of a remote lodge up there and went through this bit by bit. And while the discussions led to some changes, by and large, by the end of that three days, there was, I would have,

it was a consensus, there was a consensus in that group, that this was the best approach to take. And that was then put in the form of a document. Quite a thick document, which is somewhere in the archives, I'm sure that told the, told the story to the faculty and what we were about to do. That is once we had given it to the board, of course they had acted on it. So.

James Griesemer: [20:12](#)

so, so you, you told the faculty and the DU community, here's, here's the plan. And, I'm sure that embedded in that were a whole series of very difficult decisions. Could you talk about the articulation of the plan things that you did now to begin to implement the plan and I'm sure there were a lot of challenges?

Dwight Smith: [20:38](#)

Yeah, We identified about six units that we were just simply going to have to separate from the university and this of course involved faculty and staff. A very, very difficult thing. But we had, we simply had to do it. One the things we did. I personally went to those six units before it was announced and told them. And, we took questions about the rationale of that. I anticipated the worst, but very honestly there was very little rancor or anger, actually.

James Griesemer: [21:35](#)

But in a sense you had set the stage for difficult decisions early on in the process. Then I would also think, Dwight, that you are your long stature in high regard as a, as an academic, as a faculty member, gave you a level of credibility that perhaps others might not be able to.

Dwight Smith: [21:54](#)

I think that probably was why the board asked me to do this and the first place. It would've been difficult for somebody from outside to come and learn anything really important about the university in time to do this. And I think that was - no one ever said that, but I, I presumed that that was the reason.

James Griesemer: [22:16](#)

So you, so you had to eliminate some departments. What other kinds of things did you need to do? As



you were implementing the plan you reduced departments would have, which had to be very difficult. What other steps did you, did you need to take financially or operationally or what other kinds of things?

- Dwight Smith: [22:38](#) We felt that a structural change was necessary for the whole university. One of the things we did was, although this came a little later, but it really ties to all of this, we wanted to change the co-equal vice chancellor senior staff to one that was basically headed by a provost who was more than equal among equals.
- James Griesemer: [23:16](#) and for those listening who don't aren't familiar with the provost idea, that person is really like the chief operating officer.
- Dwight Smith: [23:25](#) Correct. Perhaps that's what we ought to call it, It's usually referred to because they really are responsible for the budget and that's how you, you know, you, you state your priorities by how you can, as you know, how you construct the budget.
- James Griesemer: [23:51](#) You sure do. So what about Dwight, what about the deans and the organizational structure of the university? Did you have to adjust that in some ways as well?
- Dwight Smith: [24:02](#) Yeah, we did. We had a large college of Arts and sciences that included all of the undergraduate teaching, entity. We decided that it ought to be more like our other our neighbor or our family of institutions and create about four faculties and reduce the size to maybe 50 or 60 faculty per unit And, the units a turned out to be natural sciences, social sciences, math and computer science. And, there's a fourth one anyway, there are four. And each of those had a head, which we called Dean, I guess some referred to it with tongue and cheek as deanlets.
- James Griesemer: [25:14](#) Those were smaller units.

- Dwight Smith: [25:15](#) Yeah. (Laughter) And very good people, well established within the community. And that went rather well. That in of course, in addition to business and law.
- James Griesemer: [25:30](#) Yes. And so lots of operational changes, restructuring, difficult decisions could we focus a second back on the financial piece. So you're making lots of operating decisions, but you still have this big financial problem out there.
- Dwight Smith: [25:49](#) Absolutely.
- James Griesemer: [25:49](#) To tell us about how you did that and where you were.
- Dwight Smith: [25:56](#) The first thing that was done was a reduction in the salary load. We reduced faculty from 450 to 390 reduced our faculty by 60.
- James Griesemer: [26:12](#) Oh my goodness.
- Dwight Smith: [26:13](#) You know, a whole, a whole college basically. And that was a necessary. And of course along with that, went an equal or larger number I think actually of staff and people associated with the department in a functional shared capacity. So that was one that was a big bite that we took. The second thing we did was to work hard on the renegotiation of our indebtedness refinancing. That was absolutely before December that had to be done. There are people who were, and some of the board helped with this. There were people in the financial community, which I'm not but worked with us in getting a refinancing done, which we did.
- James Griesemer: [27:22](#) Now, Dwight, you said by December, December of what year was that? Was at the first year. December of?
- Dwight Smith: [27:29](#) yeah,they were due in and the 30 million was doing 84.

James Griesemer: [27:36](#)

So what you've been describing is, is like a year's activity. It's just astonishing to me that you could do so much a year.

Dwight Smith: [27:46](#)

Well, you know, boy, there's a lot of, because, you know, we had all of these task forces looking at. We had a student group, trying to tell us what the students saw and what their needs were. We looked at of course, this program review. We had an interesting group that sat around almost weekly for quite a long time, just thinking about what you would put together if you were going to create a university, a new university in the rocky mountain region. What would you have to have to fit this and our history, that was kind of fun in a way. We included former chancellor Altar in that group and the dean of admission who had a, who had a good sense at that time, a new one, had a new sense of what students really needed to look for. And some faculty, we had a and I participated in that, so we had several parallel paths to try to gather,

James Griesemer: [29:25](#)

Which as you said you would have to do and to operate in such a short period of time.

Dwight Smith: [29:29](#)

Yes.

James Griesemer: [29:29](#)

You couldn't do things sequentially.

Dwight Smith: [29:31](#)

That's correct.

James Griesemer: [29:32](#)

Well, so in the, in that year, and I'm sure beyond that, you made lots of difficult decisions. Tell, tell us about some of the results you achieved. So you've now gone through this fire and fury and all difficult things. What, within a couple of years, what were the outcomes of these very tough decisions?

Dwight Smith: [29:56](#)

Okay. Let me start that, the response to that, by saying that one of the things that was hardest for me, I think for everyone involved was to see colleagues dismissed and sent down the road. Well, the first thing we did was decide that this had to take place over a year to allow, first of all, faculty

to find alternate. And we helped with placement, expertise there. We the, the one year was important for students because in order to finish a degree or find a suitable institution to continue the major that they were pursuing, it was important and we also felt that perhaps some were near enough to retirement, that they would be happy to take a year's salary and resign. A few did. And so all of that went together to that reduction of 60. So I think we treated the faculty that had to be eliminated as well as such a, such a process will allow. Yeah. Now that's by way of introduction, The structural changes I, I mentioned some of the structural changes that, that occurred. We had a lot of other units that haven't been part of this discussion yet that had been started.

Dwight Smith: [32:20](#)

Some things like a core curriculum or the college core, which was, I thought, a marvelous experiment, one which many, many institutions went through about a decade later.

James Griesemer: [32:41](#)

Well, really, I mean, you were doing some very interesting things. You were creating this common core, which as you noted, other universities did a decade later or whatever, and you were, , using interdisciplinary approaches, which of course today is what everyone is trying to do many years later. So you really were on the cutting edge in many regards.

Dwight Smith: [33:03](#)

I think. I think we were. I think it's, it's kind of unfortunate that that didn't survive for various reasons, went for awhile. But the focus on teaching I think was, was something that had an impact way beyond the attraction of students, which is, as we've already stated, we really needed.

James Griesemer: [33:38](#)

You Bet.

Dwight Smith: [33:40](#)

It had an impact that you can see today in, in the focus on the quality of teaching and the way it's done and so on.

James Griesemer: [33:51](#)

There's no question about the impact.

- Dwight Smith: [33:54](#) So even though the, the actual curriculum finally evolved into something else, it really had an effect far beyond that particular attempt to solve a serious problem.
- James Griesemer: [34:14](#) And you were operating, it just occurs to me you were operating on two campuses now, at this point.
- Dwight Smith: [34:20](#) That is correct.
- James Griesemer: [34:21](#) And that, that in itself, I'm sure could be challenging.
- Dwight Smith: [34:25](#) Yeah. We had the transportation for which there was a set schedule and there's little mini buses went back and forth and we did that for a while. It was. Yeah.
- James Griesemer: [34:41](#) Well, sounds like, I mean, you're making changes, you're doing some really innovative things. And, it sounds like the, the financial institutions were at least returning your phone calls.
- Dwight Smith: [34:54](#) Yes.
- James Griesemer: [34:55](#) And, and was there other, were there other sources of financial support that, not, not that they wouldn't necessarily solve the problem, but that began to come as a result of your progress?
- Dwight Smith: [35:06](#) That's correct. It took a couple of years, but in fairly short order we had at the time, believe it or not, the university's first million dollar gift from a single individual, a Leo Block who is a great alumnus of ours. Frank, Ricketson, who graduated from the law school, the early law school and was a giant really in the motion picture industry, left 7 million to the law school. Bart Weller who was a graduate in the physical sciences and engineering gave a million dollars for a professorship, and then the large gift was Bill Daniels who gave at the time a \$11 million toward an MBA program, development of an MBA program that he was particularly interested in, in the demeanor of people in the business community.

- James Griesemer: [36:29](#) and, and the impact of ethics, which for, for a number of years really differentiated the business school from other schools around the country.
- Dwight Smith: [36:42](#) That's correct, yeah.
- James Griesemer: [36:42](#) Well, we, we've covered an awful lot and, and although in many ways we've given not near enough time to this, the time that we've spent shows how many things you and your colleagues had to deal with simultaneously. It's like the old story of changing the tire while you're going 80 miles an hour.
- Dwight Smith: [37:06](#) Well, you know, it, it just shows what an institution composed of competent and dedicated people can do when they set their mind to it. I think probably somewhere around a hundred people in this community had an active part in forming, the things, you know, the decisions that were made and the procedures we went through. On the financial side, if I could just add a little something to the significant gifts. We found that within a fairly short time because we deliberately went out to involve the younger alumni looking well into the future. But approaching them at the time because they were young, enthusiastic, still miss the university, got them involved, and the alumni giving went I think in two years, from nine percent to 21 percent.
- James Griesemer: [38:34](#) Oh my goodness.
- Dwight Smith: [38:35](#) Of the alumni were donating to the university. Of course, those gifts helped also in increasing the endowment. Almost doubled as I recall. So it was not very large to begin with.
- James Griesemer: [38:52](#) Yeah. But still. So we, we began, we began by talking about what you saw coming in as chancellor, the perfect storm. Right. As you look back now on balance, what did you see when you left? How was DU different when you left than what you saw coming in?

Dwight Smith: [39:14](#)

In terms of certainly it was different structurally, it was much more in term with fellow or sister institutions. It had, as you put it, the chief operating officer, really the person who was responsible for the altogether, the academic environment here. That was very important. We saw the beginning at least, or the potential for moving toward a financial stability that we hadn't seen in a long time. We did not achieve real financial stability, I think in the, in the five to six years that we were involved in all this, but we certainly could see the movement toward healthy, financially healthy institution. Which I never had seen. One of the things about DU when you look back in the history, you probably remember chancellor Buchtel's comment about you never saw the sheriff, but what, he didn't dodge behind in the local tree,

James Griesemer: [40:50](#)

thinking something would be repossessed.

Dwight Smith: [40:56](#)

So, I think those are two very important things. And I saw a reemergence of a genuine caring about the undergraduate that I think had slipped a bit.. You know, so many institutions have reputations they do because of the research, the development that they do and that's important, very important. But sometimes the teaching actually takes short shrift and I, I've seen that period that it's very trying period resulted in a, you know, a really kind of a commitment of the institution community.

James Griesemer: [41:48](#)

and I think that commitment exists today.

Dwight Smith: [41:51](#)

Yeah.

James Griesemer: [41:52](#)

But this was really the renaissance of that, of that commitment. Well, Dwight, thank you so much for taking time to take us through this journey, which was, I'm sure very challenging, but probably DU is here today because of what you and your colleagues did to keep the university together during those most difficult times. I appreciate your insights about the really difficult and courageous steps that you and others took to keep the university moving



forward. Well, I hope you'll join us in the future as we continue the story of the University of Denver's remarkable renaissance. I'm Jim Griesemer. Thank you for watching.