

PRESERVING MEMORY: NEWARK AND RUTGERS
IN THE 1960'S AND 1970'S

An Interview with

BLOSSOM R. PRIMER

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

August 16, 1991

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GILBERT COHEN: Today is Friday, the 16th of August 1991. This is Gil Cohen. I'm meeting with Dr. Blossom Primer in her home in Maplewood, New Jersey. And we've been talking about old times and more recent times, too. And Dr. Primer has been on the faculty at Rutgers in Newark since—in English faculty—since 1959. And she's going to tell us a few things about her background and experience.

BLOSSOM R. B. PRIMER: I arrived at Rutgers in 1959. My name at the time was Blossom Rappaport. I was a candidate for a Ph.D. at Columbia at that time and was hired as a full-time instructor, something that was then possible even if you didn't have a Ph.D. I received my Ph.D. in 1964. And with a number of interruptions of six-month intervals up to two and a half years, I stayed at Rutgers through 1988. And during that time I was, besides being an instructor or subsequent to being an instructor, I was a lecturer, I was an adjunct faculty member in the English Department. And in my last three years I was director of the Women's Studies Program. I left Rutgers in 1988.

COHEN: Could you describe the old Rector Street campus? Which I call it anyway the Rector Street campus. Other people call it the Lombardi Street campus.

B. PRIMER: Well, I think Lombardi Street was a different street, and there were offices on Lombardi Street as well as on Rector Street. Rector Street was the building, 40 Rector Street, was the building that housed the library, and therefore it was very important to humanities people. The library, as I think probably other people have told you, was in the old vat room of one of the great breweries that had existed in Newark. And the floor was consequently rather uneven. It also kind of shook every time a truck—it vibrated—every time trucks passed on McCarter Highway.

COHEN: [Laughs] That's right.

B. PRIMER: Yes. We used to have to commute in those days among various buildings where English classes were held. In addition to our using the library at 40 Rector Street, we also had classes at 40 Rector Street. But we had classes in addition at—or I personally taught classes—also at 601 Broad Street, which was on the second floor sort of in the neighborhood of the Griffith Piano Company and the Hahne's Building. Also at 18 Washington Place, a building that had been a bank building. And on Washington Street at 151 Washington Street, which was farther down Washington Street in the neighborhood of what is now Warren Street. So that I think gives us at least four buildings that were classroom buildings. And we had offices at 15 Lombardy Street. And then—let me see. There was a time when I had an office on Central Avenue, at 65 Central Avenue, which had been an old mansion. And on one occasion, for a couple of years, three women faculty shared a very nice office. I remember one of the other ones

was Mary Plevitch Duretta [sp]. I don't remember the third person. The reason we were given an office together was that we had with this office a magnificent bathroom tiled all the way to the ceiling. It was a large square room with a gorgeous large bathtub with fine fittings. That was 65 Central Avenue. And we had offices on James Street as well, 15 James I—I'm not sure of the number of James, but it was on James Street. So that made yet another place, in a small row house which served as English Department offices specifically. And I think that was the last place that the English Department had offices before moving to the new campus. And we traveled between classes often from these various classroom buildings to office buildings. It was lively. It was good exercise. [Laughs] Down three flights and up five flights if you had a classroom on the fifth floor of 40 Rector Street. That of course was before Rector Street was taken over by I think the Chemistry Department or the science buildings. There was an air of casual good feeling [laughs] about this kind of moving around. And I don't know whether any of the senior faculty at the time were obliged to walk up to the fifth floor. But certainly we juniors did a lot of that kind of thing.

COHEN: At 40 Rector?

B. PRIMER: Yes, yes.

COHEN: How would you compare that experience, the actual working-day experience, the teaching experience, the classroom experience in the old campus to the new campus? How did it affect you?

B. PRIMER: Well, I don't think there was a great deal of difference in the sense that I think teaching on the old campus was a very serious business. I don't think the fact that we had these rather makeshift—some makeshift—facilities.... For instance, 151 Washington Street had been a storefront building, and certainly that was a rather makeshift experience. But I don't think it affected the tone or the level of teaching. We were dead serious about the way things were done. But there were some interesting variations on current or recent practice. For instance, now faculty, at least in the English Department, are observed at some point at the beginning of their careers. Some, I guess, senior faculty do this on a regular basis. When I was a young faculty person, nobody came into my classroom. But we were instructed to leave the doors open on certain days, and various senior faculty would wander by. [Laughter]

COHEN: Yes, yes.

B. PRIMER: I remember that this happened to me, and the person, Professor McGill, who was the director of the Division of Humanities—we didn't have departments then; that was before we broke into departments. We had divisions: humanities, science, and social science. And Professor McGill was lurking out in the hallway listening to me teach my class. So there was a kind of sense of informality, at least among faculty relations. I think a little more than there was in subsequent years. But so far as what went on in the classroom, students were very serious. We very seldom—I very seldom—ever had to make up make-up exams for students who missed a final. It was just a thing that was not done. And things changed eventually where that was kind of a regular part of your job, to be offering a make-up exam to students on a regular basis. I think one can say that being in the old buildings was, well, maybe not conducive to learning

physically, but we seemed to overcome that very well. The students were intent upon getting their education. I guess that's kind of typical of serious-minded people. And the building didn't affect them a great deal—I don't think. They were commuting students, as they are today. So they didn't linger on campus. And that quality I think has remained the same at Rutgers in Newark.

But still, I remember, for instance, one of the deans who was then in that position when I was relatively new on campus, was Dean Herbert Woodward, who was a geologist by training. And I remember his office at 40 Rector Street. It was very open and very visible to anyone who walked by. I don't mean to say that we charged in to see the dean. I certainly never did. But still I think there was perhaps a sense of that formal structure being somewhat less formal than it subsequently became when you had a whole barrage of offices. There was only one secretary for the dean out front. So it was a smaller operation all in all.

COHEN: When you talk about the students, how would you compare the students you taught on the old campus to the students you taught on the new campus, through— Compare the late sixties with the seventies and into the early eighties.

B. PRIMER: Well, I think there are several ways of comparing them. The one thing that is very striking is that the average age of the students today has risen. In the earlier days it was very unusual to have a quote-unquote, "older student," so much so that I remembered going back to 1959, 1960, the early sixties, a couple of the older students. I remember them by name. They tended to be outstanding. But to have a woman in her forties, for instance, as a student was really a novelty. Most of the students were in the age group of, you know, eighteen to twenty-two or very little older than that. I don't know whether it's simply looking back with a kind of nostalgia that tends to invade one, but I have vivid recollections of a couple of my earlier classes where it seemed to me I had some very outstanding students. I'm not sure I could say the same of later years. But again I—not that I haven't had some excellent students all through. But the early classes really did stand out. Again, it may be that students in more recent years have had other priorities. For instance, in the early 1960s, beginning in 1959 when I was teaching, it would have been I think almost unheard of for students to approach a faculty member and describe a series of personal problems. I don't know whether this is owing to the fact that they had fewer personal problems or family problems. I think that's probably true to some extent. I think as the students got older, and following the late sixties, you had students attending the campus who had children, who had ailing spouses, who had ailing aunts and uncles and grandparents, people they were supporting financially. I don't think very many of those students were on campus in the early sixties. For instance, I remember very distinctly one student. Again, I remember his name: Carl Hawk. And I think I see his face.

COHEN: What year was that?

B. PRIMER: This was in the early sixties.

COHEN: Early sixties.

B. PRIMER: And he was in a freshman class of mine. He came up to me, and he said he had to leave school. He regretted it very much. But he was going to be a truck driver. He couldn't afford to continue on campus. And I thought, what a pity this is. But the fact that that stood out—it still stands out in my mind—and he said, oh, he was intent upon coming back to college someday. The fact that I remember it indicates to me that it was not a very common problem. And in those days I taught four classes. That was the rule. So that I had quite a number of students. We're talking about an average of a hundred students a semester. Freshman class of let's say twenty. The rule in the English Department for instructors was three freshman courses and one sophomore course, Literary Masterpieces, which was then required of all students. If you say there were approximately twenty students in each freshman section and about forty or thirty in the Literary Masterpieces class, you have close to one hundred students a semester. And again, the fact that I remember this student, I remember his name and his plight, if you will, suggests to me that I wasn't getting that kind of a comment or that kind of explanation from very many students.

COHEN: Yes.

B. PRIMER: We didn't have students beginning a semester and dropping out the way we had subsequently.

COHEN: In the seventies?

B. PRIMER: Yes. Students who began invariably finished. Occasionally you had withdrawals. But in later years it was often impossible for me to keep some control of my roster. Students would come in, some would leave in the beginning some would drop out much later on, often owing to family pressures, when I investigated these problems, or illness. Illness seemed to become a big problem, more of a problem with students, in the later years than in the early years. Again I think because we had an older population or students who were busy trying to support families or had very heavy jobs, full-time jobs and trying to work full time, to study full time. I had one man in my class in the later seventies or maybe in the early eighties, who was taking twenty-three credits and working forty hours. He looked as if he were dying in class. [Laughs]

COHEN: That was permitted twenty-three credits?

B. PRIMER: I asked him how was that permitted? And he said, well, it was his last semester. He was married. His wife had lost her job. So far as I know they had no children. But he was under a great deal of pressure to finish up quickly. Now I know that that would never have been permitted in the early sixties. And I don't know how this student ever got away with it. And I thought what a pity it was. He did manage to scrape through because he was very bright. But I thought what a shame to simply scrape through when you have the capacity to do very well. So I think again there were a great deal of—there was a great deal of pressure on students subsequent to the early sixties. I don't think Rutgers-Newark students have ever struck me as being a carefree lot. Many did work in the early days as well. But the burdens that they carried seemed to grow much greater in the post-1960s era. Also very obviously there was a much greater influx of minority students after the riots and the restructuring of the campus in the early seventies. In particular black students. I think that was the first group of students—first group of minority

students—that seemed to me to appear on campus in any numbers. And then, of course, there have been many different groups of minority students: Hispanic students, now Asian students, and so on.

But what was very apparent to a number of us on the campus in the early sixties was the absence of black students. And I remember being part of a group that tried to look into this. Why were there so few black students on campus? The response that we got—well of course I don't know that we conducted anything like a systematic or scientific investigation. Or that we had any support from the administration or anything like that. It was basically a group of younger faculty members that were interested in this whole question. And we learned that well prepared black students from this area, from Newark, preferred to go to traditionally black colleges in the South. That was what we were told at the time.

COHEN: You were told that.

B. PRIMER: That's what we were told at the time.

COHEN: By whom?

B. PRIMER: Sometimes by black students, other black students whom one spoke to. So that was again a difference between the population in the early sixties and the population in the seventies and eighties: the advent of many more minority students on campus.

COHEN: Yes. How would you compare the level of preparation of the students in the sixties to students in the seventies? Significant differences either generally or in English composition, reading?

B. PRIMER: It's really a very difficult question to answer for the following reason: I think many of us remember where we were when President Kennedy was assassinated. I remember where I was.

COHEN: Yes, me, too.

B. PRIMER: I was in a classroom.

COHEN: I was in the Dana Library.

B. PRIMER: Okay. It was 1963. So we're talking about the early years. I was in a class—I was with a class of students that was one of the poorest I have ever taught. [Laughs] I remember very distinctly—this was a freshman class, not a very large class—I gave half the students Ds and half the students Fs. [Laughter] And two of the students Cs. And I felt sorry for the two who got Cs because I felt that if they had been in a better class, they might have done better. But there was clearly no incentive in this class. It was simply the luck of the draw. It was not a situation of classes having been arranged so that poorer students were all together. I remember that then Dean McGill asked me about this grading. And I said, "You know I haven't—I was not accustomed to doing this." I think my grading was stricter than it became subsequently.

COHEN: This was composition?

B. PRIMER: Yes, this was composition. So when you ask were the students prepared then, if I were to take this class as an example, I would say obviously no. [Laughter] I think the general level of preparation was somewhat better. I wouldn't say dramatically so. I wouldn't say that students were wonderfully prepared in the early sixties and poorly prepared subsequently. No, I can't really say that. I think the general education level, that is the kinds of subjects they had studied, even though they may not have always brought away a great deal with them when they came into college, was probably more uniform. There was a greater uniformity of preparation in the early sixties, though not necessarily better.

COHEN: Yes.

B. PRIMER: So it would really be very hard for me to say categorically that they were better prepared. I think I had a group of students... I think I had more excellent students than I did in later years. But overall, the general preparation was not that much improved in the early years over what it then was. So I don't know how to account for that precisely. Also I think one of the big differences was not so much preparation but attitude towards the work that they had to undertake. I think the students in the later seventies and maybe early eighties, at least some students, seemed to resent the curriculum a lot more. Earlier students accepted. I mean they might have liked being in freshman composition, they may not have liked the authors that they had to read, they may not have appreciated having to read Homer or have been particularly more adept at it. But they accepted that this is the course as it was given to them, and they somehow had to make the best of it. I think students later on questioned the inclusion of some of the materials in the curriculum. And of course that has led into a totally different direction: the introduction of alternative courses to Literary Masterpieces, which was a course in ancient literature, if you will, required of all students; it no longer is required of all students. And there have been substitutions now for a number of years, quite a number of years.

One striking example that occurs to me of difference in response has to do with the teaching of Thoreau's *Walden*. When I taught *Walden* in the earlier sixties and even in the later sixties, it was a book that was very difficult for the students no matter when I taught it. It has a lot of literary allusion, and the language is sophisticated. But when I taught it in the earlier years, students thought it was wonderful, just an absolutely wonderful book. They were inspired by it. In fact, one of the most stunning instances that I know about—and we don't often have students coming back to tell us; you don't really know how a particular course or a particular work affects a student's life—but I had one student come back after many years who told me that that work particularly enabled him to get through the Vietnam War. It taught him something about resistance. This student, who described himself to me after about fifteen years as a very average student who had majored in biology, took Literary Masterpieces with me. And subsequent to that, went into the Navy during the Vietnam War in order to avoid being drafted into the Army, which was something that students did, feeling that the Navy was basically a safer bet. When he got to—and he had some kind of officer's stripe, I guess because he was a college graduate. When he got out to California—he was black, one of the few black students we had—he found that some of the relatively uneducated minority enlistees in the Navy were very badly treated by

officers. And he, with the assistance of another young officer, and he claimed inspired by Thoreau, set about trying to get these men who were being taken advantage of to resist. The end result was that he was put—or his friend was put—in the brig. And he eventually was put into a psychiatric hospital from which he gained release from the Navy. But he claimed that *Walden* had had a profound influence on his life.

COHEN: And he...?

B. PRIMER: You know because of the way it taught him resistance. And he subsequently went on to I think work in—at least that's what he was doing when he came to see me—he got a master's in counseling, and he was working in California in the college system as a counselor of minority students. And this already now goes back a decade, you know.

COHEN: Yes.

B. PRIMER: So now in later years when I taught *Walden* in let's say the mid-eighties, students said, well, he's crazy, this Thoreau. What kind of stupid thing is this to do? I mean the response to this great individualist was totally different from what I had had in previous years. And it was very disappointing. So much so that I resolved that if I were to teach the course again, I would not teach that work, but would substitute one of the permissible substitutions. So there was, I think, well, let's say maybe a loss of idealism or a growing practicality in the early eighties, as opposed to a much greater idealism in the early sixties. I think the students were infected, if you will, by some of the more idealistic and liberal trends of the early sixties; even though I think our students have always been very work-oriented, job-oriented, and career-oriented because basically they have almost always come from families where they were expected to pull their weight financially...if not during college than immediately thereafter. But that was a very striking difference, which I think kind of epitomizes some of the differences between the students of let's say the earlier sixties and the mid-sixties and the early eighties. And it certainly is very similar, I think, to what other people have said on other campuses about the differences in the student population that they've encountered.

COHEN: And you taught *Walden* to the students.

B. PRIMER: Yes, yes.

COHEN: To the students. I mean he was reading *Walden* right in your class.

B. PRIMER: Oh, yes, *Walden* read in my class.

COHEN: Yes. That must have been quite an experience.

B. PRIMER: Yes.

COHEN: You mentioned earlier that you had some vivid recollections of students and experiences in the, well, I guess we were talking about the early sixties or the middle sixties. And I wonder if you could recollect for the record these.

B. PRIMER: The names?

COHEN: Well, the experiences. What was unique about either the students or the experience or....

B. PRIMER: Well, yes. Well, I remember for instance one woman; I think she was possibly my first year of teaching and again, she was one of the older students. She had four children. That was so unusual in those days. She was training to be an English teacher in high school. She was an excellent student. Her name was Frances Plosec [sp]. I remember her well. And then there was another student, a very brilliant woman though with mental illness, also an older woman, lent such distinction to the class because of her outstanding capacity to think, that we all had to sort of sit up and take notice of Marsha Lefkowitz. And I think it was almost a little joke among some of the faculty that some of us younger people felt we should get tenure for simply putting up with her. But she was a very gifted person who came back to school in later years. Then I remember at the time of the post-Newark riots, there were some interesting students who came on campus. I remember a pair of twins whom I had known vaguely because we lived in the Colonnade Apartments in Newark. These were quite noticeable young men because they were tall and distinguished-looking. And one of them showed up in my class. This was very surprising because he, to my knowledge, he was going to college elsewhere. And he was one of, I believe, a small group of students that came on the campus and registered purposely to affect some changes in the nature of the campus. Whether he was a revolutionary in the broadest sense or whether he was specifically much more interested in the rights of minority students, I am not sure to this day. But I know that after some of the changes were brought about regarding the question of open enrollment, he disappeared from the class.

COHEN: Was this before the takeover of Conklin Hall? Can you recall?

B. PRIMER: This was around that.... This was....

[Break in recording]

COHEN: We're back with Dr. Primer. And we were talking about students who enroll who....

B. PRIMER: Yes. And as I say, in this one case he really withdrew when whatever it was that he had come on campus to do seemed to be effective to his satisfaction. He was not in any sense a disruptive student in class. But he was there for a purpose and that was obvious. I also remember one class particularly, and that was the class I taught in Milton, because I had three very distinguished students in that class, one of whom went on to become a tenured member of the English Department. Another of whom founded a well-regarded small magazine. And the third of whom I haven't really followed to any extent.

COHEN: This is old campus or new campus?

B. PRIMER: This was 1971.

COHEN: Oh, they'd already moved in. Okay.

B. PRIMER: This was 1971. It was an exciting class. It was a wonderful class. And as I say, I've just mentioned three people who distinguished that class by their presence. Then in later—Were you going to say something?

COHEN: No, no. I'm sorry if I conveyed the wrong message.

B. PRIMER: Then in later years, I—and this is actually in the eighties, I remember one student who was very, very interesting and lively. And this was in a class in Literary Masterpieces. He was, I believe, a radio preacher. He was a Muslim. And needless to say, when we discussed the Bible, which was part of the curriculum of Literary Masterpieces for a semester, 215, he had a lot of interesting things to say. He was a wonderful presence in the class and very articulate, very good-humored, and very knowledgeable. And it was only I think after the semester that I learned that he was actually a radio preacher for his faith. This was, as I say, in the eighties. He energized the class. So he was someone who was very nice to remember. I do—certain students do stand out for good and ill. I remember one student coming back two years after the fact wanting me to change her grade. [Laughs] Two years! And I said, "Well, why didn't you talk to me...." We didn't do very much in the way of negotiating and grade changing in the earlier years, needless to say. That was another thing [laughs] that was somewhat different.

I think the courses that I taught, because I was for most of my career at Rutgers an instructor or a lecturer or an adjunct, I did not teach advanced courses, but mainly freshman composition and Literary Masterpieces, which was a 200-level course, in the old days taken by sophomores, but eventually taken by anyone who had a mind to take it, who wanted to take the course. I think that course was, well, one of the greatest in the English Department, and I've heard other people say the same thing. It dealt with some of the great literature of the past. And even though students found it difficult, it generated the kind of response which maybe lesser materials simply don't always generate. It was a wonderful course, and my recollections of individual students tend, as a rule, to be associated with that course because they really could speak up and shine and show their—well, their ignorance if that was the case. But always it was an interesting experience for the instructor and for the students.

COHEN: How did the pressure for changing what was considered in the canon affect such courses as, let's say, Literary Masterpieces or the curriculum in general in English? In the seventies, early eighties.

B. PRIMER: Well, insofar as the freshman segment was concerned—freshman composition—on our campus we've always taught from anthologies and handbooks. And eventually, as we all know, new anthologies were produced which gave greater voice to minorities; that is, including more minority writers of short stories, poems, essays, and dramas. So that as these materials became more available, I think we had a ready opportunity to avail ourselves of them in the freshman curriculum. Well, the whole structure of teaching freshman composition has changed a great deal over the last few years, and I'm not even sure that I can talk about that because in these most recent years, going back to let's say about eighty-four, eighty-five, I have not been involved in the freshman curriculum.

COHEN: Yes.

B. PRIMER: But there was a time, for instance, when we had no provision for ESL in the English Department.

COHEN: English as a Second Language?

B. PRIMER: Yes, English as a Second Language. The only thing you could do with a student who came in with really a need of a great deal of ESL training was to tell the student go to Columbia, [laughs] which was really obviously not an alternative because those students who came to us couldn't afford to go to Columbia. In fact I remember another student, and this was an extraordinary case. It was another semester when I taught Milton. I taught Milton twice in my career at Rutgers, once in 1971 and once a number of years later. In the second course I had a young woman from Colombia; she was a graduating senior. Intellectually she was very bright. Her language, however, even though she was a graduating senior, needed a lot of work. And when I spoke with her, I was astonished to find that she had majored in English.

COHEN: In Colombia?

B. PRIMER: No, at Rutgers in Newark.

COHEN: Oh.

B. PRIMER: And I said, "Well, how is it you majored in English?" And she said, Well, she came from Colombia not knowing any English. And she thought the way you learned English was to major in English. [Laughter] And somehow she had managed to get through. A couple of members of the English Department, including the then chairman, was not at all keen on passing her, graduating her. But she had made obviously extraordinary progress to go from no English to being able to take a course in Milton, and her writing was really not very good. But she managed to get through. And again, that was simply owing to the fact that there no provisions for students who were not native speakers or who had very poor English language skills. I remember another student who really knew almost no written English. And when he wrote his compositions for me, I had him write in a very small place in the center of the page, and then I annotated all around it in great detail. I don't think it was very helpful to him because there was simply too much that had to be done. But that was one way, of course, in which the English composition section has changed a great deal. We not only have English as a Second Language, but we have remedial English. We never had provisions for students who needed remediation in English. If a student was poor in English and took your freshman composition course, whether he was a foreign student or poorly trained from high school or simply not very bright, the only thing you would do would be to fail that student, and he'd retake freshman composition long enough until he passed it. Or often enough until he passed it.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

B. PRIMER: And he didn't get any special help except by coming to the instructor's office. But the curriculum was not at all tailored to any student who did not meet, shall we say, the basic collegiate requirements, whatever we had determined that they should be. So there has been a great, great change in the freshman section, and I think in the college as a whole, to accommodate students who don't fit, quote "the normal track" unquote.

COHEN: Is English as a Second Language, is that a separate, you were saying, course which is given in addition to freshman composition?

B. PRIMER: Well, there is something called the American Language Studies Program. And that's a separate program. It's not in the English Department. That's designed for people who need intensive training in English. And they take that before they can be admitted to the comp you see.

COHEN: Freshman composition.

B. PRIMER: Before they can be admitted to freshman composition. In the freshman composition section, I believe in the last couple of years they have separated one of their remedial sections out for students who have further ESL problems. But presumably these are students who are now capable of doing work in English except that they need a little more work. But there is a whole, shall we say, a whole program for foreign language students, just as there is Academic Foundations, which is now a department that deals with students who don't have adequate preparation in English language or in mathematics. And this never existed before the later seventies and early eighties.

COHEN: Now that you've mentioned Academic Foundations, how effective has it been in preparing students for college-level work—in your perception?

B. PRIMER: Well, occasionally I have had students who I knew came through Academic Foundations. One doesn't always know this. And occasionally I have known that this was their background. And they have done well. On other occasions they haven't done well. I really can't generalize about that. I don't know because in the years in which this program has developed more fully, I really was away from the freshman teaching.

COHEN: Sure.

B. PRIMER: I haven't done much freshman teaching since 1984. I didn't do freshman teaching. I occasionally in women's studies in the introductory course had a student whom I knew was in Academic Foundations. I had one, really a lovely, lovely person trying very hard. I think with additional work she probably would make it in college. I don't think she was ready when she took my course in the later eighties. But some of my work with women's studies was administrative. So again, I didn't meet as many students in the classroom as I did in the earlier sixties or seventies.

COHEN: You mentioned the Newark riots in passing. What recollections do you have of that event in July of sixty-seven?

B. PRIMER: I remember students floating in and out of class. It was rather hard to continue to conduct classes.

COHEN: In July of sixty-seven?

B. PRIMER: Oh, no.

COHEN: The riots.

B. PRIMER: Oh, the riots of sixty-seven. Oh, my, I lived in Newark.

COHEN: What recollections do you have of the riots?

B. PRIMER: Well, at the time of the riots, we, my husband and I and then one small son, lived in the Colonnade Apartments. So we had a view of the housing projects where a lot of the activity really took place, and where there were shootings. We happened to be out of town at the time. We were in Pittsburgh visiting friends, and when we heard about the riots, we called up friends living in the Colonnade to ask if it were safe to come back. And she said, "Yes, you can come back now." I remember we had driven to Pittsburgh. We drove back. We could not get off the parkway at any Newark exit. There were police and national guardsmen blocking the exits. And when we finally got off and drove through the streets of Newark, the streets were absolutely deserted except for tanks. I've never forgotten that. It was as close as I've been to being in a war zone. It was actually pretty quiet by the time we got back to the apartment. We just didn't go near the windows which were these large plate glass windows. But things seem to be, as I say, pretty quiet when we got back.

COHEN: How were things on campus in September of sixty-seven after Labor Day, after the riots? Anything you can remember?

B. PRIMER: I don't remember that there was anything on campus at that time. I think the repercussions of the riots really occurred much later. Or a couple of years later. It wasn't until the building was actually taken over—or Conklin Hall was taken over....

COHEN: February of sixty-nine, yes.

B. PRIMER: That we really began to, I say, get some of the fallout from the riots. But my recollection, and I guess I could be wrong about this—maybe I've blotted it out—but I don't remember anything specific about sixty-seven or any problems in the fall of sixty-seven on campus. Mm-hmm.

COHEN: What did you see then—well, let's say then—as the grievance among the students who took over Conklin Hall?

B. PRIMER: I'm not really sure what the students were most concerned about at that time. I think the main question seemed to be minority enrollment and open admissions. That was the

thrust of it. I don't really think it had anything to do with curriculum or students feeling that they wanted to change the canon. That's something that's really come much later, significantly later. It was a question of admitting to college students who had not been admitted before and getting financial aid for them. The whole question of financial aid, which of course became a government thing, federal thing...made it possible for more students to attend college. But that was really the problem, how do we get more minority students into the college? As I saw it, that was their grievance. There were not minority students in attendance on campus.

COHEN: How would you describe the main divisions among the faculty on the whole question of admissions, of the students who were involved in the takeover?

B. PRIMER: Well, I think there was a general feeling... I think there was probably a lot of sympathy from the faculty; although as a whole, I don't think the faculty condoned the takeover, though they understood the reason behind the grievances. I'm sure there were many who felt that this was lawless behavior. But essentially I think the takeover was fairly peaceful. It was nothing like what went on at Columbia, for instance. At Columbia, as I understood it, a lot of the bitterness was generated by a sense of the faculty's not, quote-unquote "caring" about the students. Faculty were involved in their own thing at Columbia, doing their research, even in those days as every faculty person is now. And I think that had something to do with the vehemence of the riots at Columbia. But I honestly don't believe that many of the students at Rutgers felt that the faculty didn't care about them. There was a much...well, it was a smaller campus, and there was a sense of involvement or general concern with the students. So that it wasn't that kind of issue, but mainly the issue of opening up the campus.

COHEN: Yes, yes, yes. And basically affirmative action in recruitment and enrollment of the students.

B. PRIMER: Yes.

COHEN: On the subject of affirmative action, how did that period impact on the recruitment—affirmative action—in the recruitment of faculty, minority faculty?

B. PRIMER: Well, there were—when I came on campus, there were very, very few women faculty. I believe that the year before I joined the English Department in 1959, possibly the first female instructors had been hired in English in any significant number. Of course none of those people remained with the faculty. But there were no women in English in tenured positions. I believe there was a woman in economics who had tenure—Helen Cook. She may not have had tenure exactly in fifty-nine or sixty, but thereafter I mean. There was a woman in the Spanish Department—two women. One I think had tenure, but she moved on the year I came in. So I think affirmative action really affected the hiring of women more than it did of minorities. I can't remember.... I remember seeing more women on the faculty than there had been. I cannot remember seeing very many black faculty or Hispanic faculty or Asian faculty members immediately following the riots or in the early seventies. And I think even now, as we know, there are not too many minority faculty on campus, apart from women.

COHEN: On the question of affirmative action for women faculty, when did the movement really get started on campus for equal rights for women faculty, either from the point of view of recruitment or the one point of view of promotion and tenure?

B. PRIMER: Well, I think in the early seventies. There was a group of women that were very active in trying to call attention to inequities in salary and inequities in hiring. And these women, some of whom I think perhaps you will interview like Marie Collins possibly.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

B. PRIMER: The late Helen Strauser was very involved in this. Dorothy Dinnerstein was another who was in the forefront of trying to get...I think the whole question of equity in salary was a big one. And in hiring. I don't know how effective they were. But they organized at this time, in the early 1970s. I was not—I was out for a couple of years at that time, so I wasn't very actively involved in that. I was out from seventy-three to seventy-six; for about two and a half years I was not on campus. And I think that was a critical time for the recruitment of women. Even so, I don't think—until fairly recently women have not in any considerable numbers attained tenured positions in some of the departments. Of course now they are doing a lot better, as we know.

COHEN: Yes. Can you mention for the record any of the test cases that came up at that time?

B. PRIMER: There was a class action case that I know about, in which Helen Strauser was involved. But I cannot recall any person in those days suing for tenure. Again, I could be wrong about that. I think the class action case had to do with salaries and inequities in salaries. And indeed the case was won, and they did—I think they did get some back salary.

COHEN: The class action suit.

B. PRIMER: Yes.

COHEN: Do you remember any other names of people who were...

B. PRIMER: Well, Helen Strauser was involved in that. Dorothy Dinnerstein. I don't know if Lillian Robbins was involved. I wouldn't be surprised if she were. Marie Collins was involved in that. And again, as I say, Helen Cook, whom I mentioned, was involved in that and getting back pay. Well, I had an experience myself which—at this point, as I can't remember the dates, it was in the later seventies, I believe—I was a lecturer, a lecturer at the rank of assistant professor. And at that time assistant professors who had taught four courses in English went to teaching three courses. I realized that I was not being compensated then as I should have been because I was teaching two courses, meaning two thirds, but I was compensated at half. And I went to see the then Dean Blumenthal. And I did not have a suit against the university, but I said, "Look at this." And he said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. We will take care of this immediately." And he did. [Laughter] That was a different way of doing things, you know. And it was taken care of.

COHEN: What was the outcome of the class action?

B. PRIMER: Well, I think it mainly took the effect of equalizing salaries. I think some of the women who were in professorial ranks, who did have tenure, were receiving rather less in the way of salary than their male counterparts. And it had to do with wage equity. That was the principal aspect of it. And as I say, they did get back pay. So they were compensated. Of course there was another byproduct of this whole movement, the women's movement, and that had to do with the establishment of a program in women's studies. This was the period in which the Women's Studies Program began, with a series of courses offered by interested faculty in their own departments on women in relation to their disciplines: women in sociology. This was, I guess—oh, what is her name? In sociology. Well, I can't remember. I've drawn a blank, but she's there now. Duberman, Lucille Duberman was involved. She gave a course in the Sociology Department. Adrienne Harris in the Psychology Department, Virginia Tiger in English, Helen Strauser in science—well, I'm not sure what course she gave. Yes, she may very well have started the course on human sexuality in the Physiology Department. Marie Collins, women writers in French, in the French Caribbean. So there were a series of courses that were loosely tied together in what is called now—and what was called then—the Women's Studies Program. And it became possible for students to take eventually a minor in women's studies.

COHEN: Do you recall what the basic argument of the class action was?

B. PRIMER: No, I do not.

COHEN: Not involved? Mm-hmm.

B. PRIMER: I was really not involved in that, so I can't be helpful. [Laughs]

COHEN: And you did mention its effect on.... Any other further influence on curriculum reform or a new curriculum.

B. PRIMER: Of course this was also the period when the Afro-American Studies Program started. And I can't say which program influenced which other program. Whether Afro-American came first or women's studies came second or vice versa. But it was the same period in which Afro-American studies had its beginnings on the campus. So there have been changes in the curriculum, very definitely, affecting not only courses that already existed, but introducing a range of new courses in these areas of ethnic studies. Not so much other ethnic studies. I don't think—I think Puerto Rican studies was much later. But Afro-American studies and women's studies came in in the early seventies.

COHEN: Just going back a bit, you mentioned the student who read *Walden* in your class and who found it an inspiration and a source of strength during the war in Vietnam. What effect did the war have on teaching on the campus at that time? What effect—specifically the student activism, the student opposition to the war have?

B. PRIMER: My recollection is that student opposition was limited to a rather small number of students on campus at the time. It's really rather curious, but in some ways I think it was a rather sleepy campus, sleepy because students were working at their jobs and studying at the same

time. I think this was a campus where students did not have the luxury perhaps—if that's the right word—of stopping out of school, protesting. There was some, but it was not a very active group, it was not a very large group. I think—I'm trying to think whether there were any specific changes in the curriculum that were brought about by this. Of course now there is a whole... I mean there are at least several courses on Vietnam, and at least one of them is taught in the English Department. But that's a totally different situation.

COHEN: Right, right.

B. PRIMER: Yes. I think there was opposition to the war, but I don't believe—I think I'm correct in saying that it did not disrupt the campus.

COHEN: How did it affect the content of your teaching—if at all?

B. PRIMER: I do remember at the time teaching what we might call some of the antiwar—the ancient plays. Since was teaching Literary Masterpieces we got into Euripides with his antiwar plays. Of course the war that he was opposing was the Trojan War and slavery and also the servitude of women and the Medea. So that I think both the women's movement and the Vietnam War caused me to choose emphases in some of the works that I was teaching and even to choose certain works which I might not have chosen before. Certainly we were conscious of the war. But I was dealing with Homer. I was dealing with Shakespeare. I found it rather difficult to include in a direct way discussions of the Vietnam War. And I don't believe I did. But it was certainly an influence in determining materials, shall we say. And when it came to teaching freshmen, we did have discussions in connection with essays. We'd read the newspapers, so we did discuss as was relevant to the works that we were dealing with, the war and other current issues, as I would today.

[End of Tape #1]

COHEN: We are back with Dr. Primer. And we were talking about....

B. PRIMER: Well, I'll just kind of resume by saying that so far as my teaching went, if I were teaching what I considered to be a traditional text, Homer let us say, in which there is obviously a lot of war and discussion of war, I certainly would have thought it appropriate to mention the Vietnam War in context, in that context. But I don't believe I tried to change the curriculum of Literary Masterpieces to include works that would have been totally impossible actually. I don't think anybody teaching that course would have done differently than what I did. Now, when you get into a course like the freshman composition course where the subject is much freer and one can choose from contemporary materials, there it is possible to bring in all kinds of current issues. And I'm sure that at various times, I did include materials relevant to the current scene, whatever they happened to be, whether women's issues or the war or issues of minorities and so on. I've always been... I think I've always been particularly interested in women's issues, and that was why eventually, much later, I did get into the Women's Studies Program and became the director of the program.

COHEN: Could you get into that in some detail—what the program was about and what you did?

B. PRIMER: The Women's Studies Program is designed to give a voice to concerns that are not heard in the traditional curriculum. Thus, for instance, there is a course—there's more than one course—on women and literature. And of course on women's history, more than one course actually now. Marriage and the family. The women in psychology or rather the whole issue of psychology as it relates to women. The idea behind women's studies is to make it possible for these previously unheard voices to be heard and for unheard points of view to be heard, for unread literary works often of great merit to be read and considered. And I guess the ideal also is to phase out these special studies when women are completely integrated in the curriculum and every other way. That hasn't happened, however. I believe, therefore, that this is a very valid discipline, and it has been. It's often very enlightening to get a different perspective on certain attitudes, certain historical events when seen from the position of what we now would consider to be nontraditional sources—or which we used to consider nontraditional sources, like oral narrative, for instance, or letters or diaries. These documents which were totally disregarded by political historians except as they impinged for instance on politics. World events have come to the fore in women's history courses; and have affected not only women's history, but the history of countries and civilizations because they've introduced a new element which had been disregarded before. So this is, I think, what women's studies has really been about, to give an airing, a hearing, a legitimacy to a point of view which was disregarded.

And to those who may have scoffed at it, it might be something of a surprise to learn that Jane Austen was not admitted to the canon of great writers at Columbia University—Columbia College—until the late 1980s. When I was in the Women's Studies Program, since I began that job in 1985, so during my time there, between eighty-five and eighty-eight, I clipped out of the newspaper and I kept on my desk an article which said that Jane Austen had finally be admitted to the great books curriculum of Columbia College. I don't remember the exact date, but it was during my tenure in that job. It was somewhere after 1985. So one can see, given that context, how essential women's studies has been, and I think still continues to be. Often I found when I was teaching women's studies, that students in the introductory course, which is kind of a general exploration of the field, would suddenly see the light, so to speak. I can recall one student, who worked at a job in an auto supply place, Strauss Stores or one of those places, suddenly realizing why she was having such a bad time on her job. It had nothing to do with her as a worker, but everything to do with her as a girl—a woman.

COHEN: This was in what course?

B. PRIMER: This was the intro to women's studies, which is kind of a mixture of history and literature, looking at the woman's—as I taught the intro to women's studies, since my discipline is literature, I used literary texts to discuss women's experiences: short stories, poetry, some sociological articles. And depending on the person who teaches that course, whether that person is a sociologist, a scientist, a historian, the course takes a different angle. But the object of the introductory course is to provide a broad general base for looking at women's experiences.

COHEN: Now since there's no women's studies department—

B. PRIMER: Yes.

COHEN: How were the courses actually organized and implemented through departments?

B. PRIMER: The way it worked was that there was a director or coordinator which was the job that I fulfilled. In every case the person teaching a course in women's studies had to belong to another department: History Department, Psychology Department; had to be a regular member of that department. And had to offer a course which was also acceptable and recognizable—recognized—in that department. Thus, Women and Literature, which is a one-year course, two-semester course, can be offered in the English Department as fulfilling certain English Department requirements. And it can also be offered towards the fulfillment of the minor in women's studies. Now during the time that I was there—and of course it was the job of the director or the coordinator to solicit all of these people and department chair people to get the person to teach the course. Sometimes if a new course were being offered it would have to go through the Courses of Study Committee in the usual way. So all of the courses were bona fide courses in the respective departments. The only course that was different was the intro to women's studies. And actually on the books there are some other courses like special topics in women's studies. Now in such a case, in order to get a person to teach that course, a given department would have to offer release time so that the person could teach a course out of the department.

COHEN: I see.

B. PRIMER: But in every other case the person was teaching a course that was cross-listed or interdisciplinary in that sense. And then in my last year in women's studies, I did introduce a major in women's studies; that is, a major was developed, and it was passed unanimously by the faculty in fact, recognizing that women's studies should be a legitimate major in the department. That it's on the books, however, doesn't mean that anyone is majoring in women's studies. I don't really know if that has happened because, as I understood when I left, though it was passed, it still had to go to the Department of Higher Education in New Jersey, as the process was a two-year process. And I really haven't kept in touch, and I don't know whether the new chairperson or director of women's studies has taken it through all those various steps. But it now exists as a major in the college.

COHEN: How is the women's studies curriculum put together by the various disciplines that were involved in it?

B. PRIMER: Well, I think it was a matter of brainstorming. Do you recall brainstorming?

COHEN: Yes.

B. PRIMER: And also the availability. So much depends on the availability of a person to give a course, but that's not unique to women's studies. If you have an English Department in which you do not have an Anglo-Saxon specialist, you cannot offer Old English or whatever. If you want to offer a course in Chinese history and you cannot hire someone who is an expert in

Chinese history, then the History Department lacks that particular course. In a similar way, women on the faculty—and they included Marie Collins and Helen Strauser and Virginia Tiger; I must name those as principals, and Adrienne Harris, Lucille Duberman—these women.... And also I believe the current chair of sociology—what is her name? Who edits the *Partizan Review*. Edith—

COHEN: Kurzweil.

B. PRIMER: Edith Kurzweil. These women got together and decided which courses they could start off with. It was not a question of suddenly blitzing the campus with ten courses in women's studies. It started out with a very small number. Women in Literature was one of the very first courses offered. Gradually the program has grown. While I was there, I got grant money to offer a new course on Women in Music. The money had to come from outside of the college, the college could not provide this money. Since the grant application was successful, we were able to offer that course for two years. Now it's still on the books. We had to hire a specialist for it, you see, that's what the grant money went for in part, to pay for this special instructor. The course exists, but that doesn't mean that it can be offered every year. But that is a problem that is common to many departments. So I think the program in women's studies started with a very small number of courses which have increased, which have grown. One of the more recent courses, and this one was added in 1985, I believe, was Black Women in the United States, which is essentially—I guess it's kind of a combination of sociology and history. This is a course that's proved to be enormously popular. It's offered in the evening.

COHEN: What department offers it?

B. PRIMER: It's cross-listed in women's studies and Afro-American studies. It's offered in the evening for a number of reasons, one being that it was very hard to get a qualified person to teach it, and the one who is doing it has a full-time position, I believe, elsewhere. So the only time she could come was in the evening. But that's, as I say, that's a course that's been very popular and has had a very strong enrollment in the evening where there are many, many black women enrolled and who have found it a very satisfying course.

COHEN: You mentioned enrollment. What kind of enrollments have the courses generally had in the whole history of women's studies, the seventies into the eighties. If you can recollect.

B. PRIMER: Well, I can only tell you really that the enrollment has grown steadily. And in the time I was there, from eighty-five to eighty-eight, because I think the program had a great deal of publicity owing to the grant that I received and some special programs that I developed in which I brought prominent women composers to the campus, jazz musicians and so on, the enrollment went from approximately five hundred and eighty students a year in courses—we're not talking about minoring in women's studies or majoring or anything like that.

COHEN: No, no.

B. PRIMER: Enrolled in courses five hundred eighty-six to over eleven hundred.

COHEN: Oh!

B. PRIMER: That was a very dramatic rise. And I think it was owing partly to publicity, to the availability of interesting materials, to word of mouth, visibility, if you will, the prominence of the women's movement. Whether that enrollment has continued to remain steady, whether it's grown or declined since 1988, I really cannot tell you.

COHEN: When did you say again that the minor started and the first courses in the minor were offered?

B. PRIMER: Quite a number of years ago.

COHEN: That was in the seventies?

B. PRIMER: That was in the seventies, yes. And over the years we have only occasional people minoring in women's studies. One or two a year. But again, there are other disciplines where you have very few minors—at least on our campus. I don't know. Do we have any classics majors or minors? I don't think you can be a classics.... Well, theoretically you can be a classics major at Rutgers in Newark. But I don't think you have very many. It's not.... You see one of the problems with women's studies is recognition of women's studies because it is an interdisciplinary subject. Interdisciplinary studies generally have difficulty in being recognized. They don't fit comfortably into a college curriculum. We're so much used to the departmental structure that the whole question of such things as accreditation, hiring, tenure, promotion, all of these things, affect interdisciplinary studies, whether you're talking about Asian studies, women's studies, American studies. So it's partially been, I think, administrative. And also, from the point of view of practicality, students who are concerned with jobs, who are job-oriented, are perhaps more likely to major in accounting than they are in women's studies. [Laughter] And of course that's been one of the big things that's happened on the Newark campus: the growth of the business major and the accounting major. That's one of the most dramatic phenomena of the eighties. Fifty percent of the college majors are in business. So all liberal studies suffer.

COHEN: Yes, I wanted to get into that. Now how has the business program specifically, as you say...the humanities programs has suffered in what respect?

B. PRIMER: Well, I don't think I have anything against the business major. What I do find disastrous is that students majoring in business have to take virtually all their credits in business. In order for accounting majors to be accredited when they graduate by the National Accounting Society, they have to take not merely the twenty-four credit accounting majors. I don't think there's any problem with the student taking twenty-four credits in accounting if he has a hundred twenty-five credits for graduation. There are so many other opportunities. But when you have to take seventy credits or whatever it is that they're required to take, it obviously affects their ability to take any liberal studies. It's cut down.... I think one of the saddest things that's happened on the Newark campus—maybe the trend has been reversed in the last three years—is the drop in students taking foreign languages. Here we are pushing for internationalism. I mean the businesses are going abroad, we're doing more and more business with Europe. We're talking about 1992 and Japan as a power. And our students are taking fewer and fewer foreign

languages. I think that's been a great loss on campus. So I think the business major has certainly contributed to the decline in students taking courses in liberal studies, whether it's English or history or foreign languages or philosophy or whatever.

COHEN: Do you think that during this period, seventies into the eighties, that student interest in the humanities has declined or it's just that their taking business courses in order to place themselves in the job market?

B. PRIMER: I really don't think that interest in the humanities has seriously declined. I think, from what I've heard, there are many students in the evening session, for instance, who come to college at night who are taking courses in philosophy. I think the enrollment in philosophy is very strong. And these are obviously students who want something more out of their education than an occupational ticket. I think that's certainly an indication of interest in the humanities. I think one of the things that has happened—and it's been going on for a very long time, however, if we're considering humanities—is the whole question of relevancy. College students, and this I know from people on other campuses, have a great interest in learning about their own times. They are interested in literature of the eighties, history of the eighties; anything before 1960 seems to be ancient history to them. So that in one sense I think perhaps, at least among some students, the knowledge of the past and interest in the past has declined or faltered or wavered at least temporarily. But I think there's still interested in taking literature courses and history courses—provided they're relevant, provided they're about last year and don't go too far back, you know. But again, I don't really think they have ceased to be interested in the humanities. It's just that they're I think interpreting humanities somewhat differently perhaps from students in the past. Thinking, you know, humanities is not the Greeks or the Middle Ages, but more recent history.

COHEN: You're saying that the students in the past were more willing to deal with the past than they are now?

B. PRIMER: No, I don't think I'm saying that. But as I think I mentioned an hour or so ago, students in the early sixties accepted the fact that they had to take Literary Masterpieces, which included Homer and Aeschylus and Sophocles and Plato. They simply accepted it. They weren't necessarily more interested in it or didn't seek it out on their own. But education was more prescriptive. And in this way perhaps some students became more interested in the past than they might have been. I don't know that they were inherently more interested in the past. For instance I can recall one student who.... Well, again, going back to the ancient days, when I used to teach Homer, since I had studied Greek for a number of years, I'd start the class by reciting the opening part of the *Odyssey* in Greek. And I remember one student who.... Well, it was not only that, but it was studying the Greeks that caused him to take a course in classical Greek. So if you have a student body of let's say freshman or sophomore group of six hundred students and every student is required to take Homer and Aeschylus and so on, I guess some of them are bound to look back in the past. But if very few of them are required to take that course, they relatively fewer seek out the past. But I don't think that has anything to do with humanities. I think these are almost two different questions. They're related, but they're different questions. I still think students are very interested in the humanities. I've had many students say, oh, I wish I didn't have to major in accounting. Or I wish I weren't majoring in medical technology. There are so

many courses I would like to take, that I'm interested in. And I think that reflects a continuing interest in the humanities. I think the older students are very much interested in the humanities. I think that partially explains why programs like the Master of Liberal Studies has grown up not only in our college but in many colleges. These are people who have missed this in their earlier education and believe they have the leisure or for whatever reason are now coming to take liberal studies courses which they didn't get as undergraduates. But getting back to, you know, the question of the ancient Greek matter, now that's something that I used to do. I used to recite this opening of the *Odyssey*. I'm sure some of the students giggled, and some of them were impressed. But that was something that I could not have done in later years. It just wouldn't have gone.

COHEN: Why? Why the change? Why were the students in those days willing to accept, in your words, the prescriptive curriculum compared to the students in the seventies and into the eighties?

B. PRIMER: Well, I think when students come to college, they've already, today, had a curriculum that is not necessarily prescriptive in high school. They have a smorgasbord of courses. A good deal has been written about current high schools, mega high schools where students can take an array of courses. In previous years high school was much more prescriptive. And therefore students came to accept the fact that they were going to be prescribed a certain number of requirements. When I went to college in the early fifties, the first two years of college were entirely prescriptive. And we kind of accepted that that was the way it was going to be. So therefore [laughs] they were willing to put up with this instructor spouting this Greek which they didn't understand. And maybe one student out of five hundred would say, Gee, that sounds interesting. I think I'll take a course in Greek. [Laughs]

COHEN: Interesting. I have a few questions about the faculty, and then we'll get into administration. A question: In the seventies, and I guess now, too, the question comes up from time to time—or regularly, I should say—about the impact of the university's demand for research and publication on teaching effectiveness? What can you say about that?

B. PRIMER: I should really write a book about it.... [Laughter]

COHEN: [Laughs] I hit a rich vein!

B. PRIMER: This, of course, is not new. I remember my first MLA meeting when I was still a graduate student. And a group of us were having a drink, and our eyes were popping out as one acquaintance of ours, who had his Ph.D. and had gone to the University of Illinois where he was teaching, said that he had managed to turn his dissertation into forty articles. [Laughter] So you see, publish or perish is very much alive. I have to speak to this as someone who's had a very poor record of publication. So obviously you're not getting the response of someone who has produced a book. I think it's great if one can do one's research and teach at the same time. I don't think many people have that kind of energy. Inevitably, for most people, one or the other is going to have to be shortchanged. And because the universities are demanding more and more publication and more and more distinction in print, the teaching of undergraduates has suffered. I mean this has become a cliché, everybody recognizes it. I'm not sure that everybody knows what

to do about it. One of the problems is how do you evaluate teaching? Perhaps if there were a sure-fire way of evaluating teaching, then the problem would be less acute. I think among some college administrations there is a sincere desire to evaluate teaching. I'm not sure that it exists at Rutgers at all. I've never had the feeling that it did. In other colleges they really grappled with this. But is the successful teacher the one whom the students love because they're getting good grades? See, the relationship of teaching and grades is so interconnected that I'm not sure that they can be divorced unless one goes to an ungraded system. And then, you know, teaching effectiveness is really a curious thing.

I had a very humiliating experience—or rather a humbling experience—many years ago when I ran into a former student. And this is from the old days. And, oh, she greeted me very warmly, and she said, Oh, how well I remember your class. All of those commas and semicolons. And I thought, I'm not sure that I want to be remembered that way. [Laughs] Or that that is really a mark of a good teacher. So, yes, I think.... I don't know what the answer is to this question. I think the two-year colleges may have taken over the mission that once belonged to the liberal arts colleges; that is, they are trying to get teachers to deal closely with students to be more accessible and available to students. And maybe that's the root we will go, where our four-year colleges and universities, four-year colleges with university aspirations, are simply going to emphasize research. I don't see any reversal of the trend.

COHEN: No.

B. PRIMER: As the job market shrinks, it becomes more and more.... It becomes....

[Break in recording]

COHEN: We were saying....

B. PRIMER: Well, we were talking about teaching. I know that the argument for research, that is for having a scholar who is an active researcher also teach in the classroom, is that good research animates the teaching. The teaching is then not dead, but it's current, it's vibrant, it's alive. But I really wondered. I remember when I was preparing for my doctor's orals at the time that I was in my first year of teaching at Rutgers, I was dealing with materials which even in those days seemed to me to be so remote from the students that there was no way that I could bring Renaissance poetry in French and Italian to my—because I did my degree in comparative literature—to my students in English except in the most general way. And I wonder whether this is true.... I think if you are doing scientific research for instance, if you are dealing with, oh, cures for diabetes or research on different forms of metabolism and you are lecturing in a medical school, then obviously I think research has a direct relationship to what you do. But I'm really not sure how research in literature, for instance, can impinge in an important way on the teaching of freshman composition.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes. During that period when the whole question of teaching and research and promotion and tenure, especially I would say during that period, began to emerge and the whole question of tenure in the seventies, in the early seventies, and after the faculty organized

through AAUP, how would you assess, how did you feel about the role of the AAUP in dealing with faculty grievances at the time, particularly tenure?

B. PRIMER: Well, I must explain that I was not represented by the AAUP. As someone who worked less than full time, I was not involved. I was—the AAUP rep has only very recently, within I think since 1988, represented anyone who worked below full time status. So we had no status. Part-timers had no status. I remember in past years trying to talk to Wells Ketty about this, before the organizational movement of part-timers began, and the traditional argument was that the AAUP has its hands full working to represent full-time staff and faculty. And to get into the whole part-timers situation is very, very difficult. Many part-timers.... You see I think at one time people who worked as part-timers often had other jobs. They'd come in and give a course as a specialist. As indeed some are today. Journalists, for instance, come in and teach one course. We have this at Rutgers-Newark. Composers come and teach a course or graphic artists. And they really were tangential to the college and the university. They came, they did their work, and they left the campus. But beginning in the later seventies, part-timers were increasingly people who made their living this way and who were part-timers on more than one campus in order to do so. And their commitment, if not full time to a specific campus, was not to being a composer and then a teacher on the side; but to being an instructor full time basically, even though you had to put together these halves from two campuses or three or even four campuses. So I think the nature of part-time work changed. And the AAUP lagged behind in organizing part-timers, which was something that was done at the City University in New York well before the AAUP at Rutgers got into it.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

B. PRIMER: Part-timers were represented for a number of years. So I can't really say, you know, how I felt about AAUP representation because I was always aware that the AAUP wasn't me. [Laughs]

COHEN: Wasn't representing you anyway.

B. PRIMER: Wasn't representing me. [Laughs]

COHEN: I want to get back to the question of the evaluation of faculty. How have you felt about the use of student evaluations of faculty?

B. PRIMER: Generally speaking—and I have seen my evaluations—I have not found them to be either.... I have looked over faculty evaluations, and I think they tend to fall sort of in the middle. I think perhaps student evaluations of faculty can screen out certain outstanding problems. Or maybe certain unusual outstanding teachers. But as a rule, I think they all fall kind of in the middle, his teacher is okay. And then there is a problem, I am not sure sufficient attention has been paid to the difference between evaluating teachers of required courses—there still are a few like English composition—and teachers of elective courses. There has got to be a difference in the student mindset towards a course which the student is simply required to take and may not see the value of, which is simply a nuisance, and a course which the student feels is going to increase his or her productivity. And I don't think that is a factor. I think it's true that

there is a place where you fill in, you know, filling in your little boxes with your pencil about whether this is a required course or something. There may be a way of indicating that. But I'm not sure much attention has really been paid to that on the evaluations. What I think is much more useful than simply just fill in computerized business is having students write an essay about the teacher. If you want to use student evaluations of that kind, then I guess they do have some place. There's always going to be an element of prejudice one way or another. But those, I think, can be dropped out. I think they usually do; they drop out the lowest, and they drop out the highest when they reckon these things up. Yes, I guess they do have their place, and they're not bad. But I think they have to be much more comprehensive. And I do believe that if a student is obliged to write a paragraph about the instructor, a lot more benefit can be gained than if he simply says: "Is acceptable," "Is not acceptable." Is in the top ten percent of my instructors, is in the bottom ten percent. You know that I think is of limited value except to a statisticians.

COHEN: Do you have any sense of how receptive the faculty has been to the use of the student evaluations? Obviously it's used.

B. PRIMER: I think it's acceptable. Then there's another problem. Student evaluations are distributed at the end of the semester, which is quite natural. [Laughs] It's been my experience and that of a number of other faculty that attendance at the end of the semester is very poor. Students in the last days are preoccupied with writing their terms papers and meeting deadlines, and they frequently cut class. So that if you have a class of twenty students, you might very well find that ten students show up, even though you announce that this is the day they're going to fill out their evaluations. And also I've always told students that if they miss writing an evaluation in class, they can go to the English office and get a form. But they don't take the time to do that. So again, the faculty feels, well, this is something we go through, but for a variety of reasons, it's become quite automatic. It's not successful—it's not completely successful for the reasons I've mentioned: the failure of a hundred percent or even eighty percent of the students to file the evaluations and the nature of the evaluations themselves, which are geared to being counted by the computer and not designed to be helpful. Now when faculty members grade student papers, we are supposed to write comments on the paper. That's supposed to be helpful. By the same token, if the object of student evaluations is to help faculty and to provide something like a mutual exchange, then they, too, should have to write comments instead of filling in little dots or circles.

COHEN: I want to move into the area of your perception of the various administrations of the university, particularly in Newark. And let's start from the top. Mason Gross's contributions as administrator, how did you perceive them?

B. PRIMER: Well, I have always felt very remote from New Brunswick—from any of the administration people in New Brunswick. There has been no contact, I suppose, between myself as a lower faculty member, not a professor. I know full professors have meetings. There's a university senate and so on which has Newark representation. But I can't really say that I've had any opinion, even though Edward Bloustein was very visible, for instance. Rarely did I feel any sense that this was our president or anything like that. So I can't even really comment. It's been a very remote relationship.

COHEN: Malcolm Talbott was the vice president for the Newark campus from 1965 to seventy-two or three, I don't remember the official date. What can you say about his contributions and in particular his role in the negotiations during the Conklin Hall takeover.

B. PRIMER: I believe he was sincerely involved with the Newark campus. I believe he was very committed to its well-being, to equitable solutions to problems on the campus. I didn't have too much to do with him, but I really had a positive feeling about him and his contribution to the campus. I didn't simply feel that he was a figurehead from New Brunswick or somebody appointed by New Brunswick, but someone who was concerned for the Newark campus.

COHEN: The deans of the College of Arts and Sciences: Herbert Woodward. What can you say there?

B. PRIMER: Well, those were the more informal days. Dean Woodward, I think, belonged to those blessed days when the dean could sit and even find time to do some of his research in his office. [Laughs] As a young faculty person and someone in a discipline that was very removed from his—he was a geologist—I didn't really have much personal contact with him. I did meet him when I was hired or contract renewed or so on. But that was the period of benign deanship where the dean was not an adversary, definitely, but a representative. Even though I didn't have any direct contact with him, I felt that.

COHEN: That's very good. [Laughter] No, that's very good. This is all new—to me anyway. William Gilliland was....

B. PRIMER: Oh, well he was a disaster. [Laughs] He came from elsewhere, as you know—Nebraska, whatever. He was not familiar with the campus. I would say in general, I've opposed the elevation of those people, especially to that kind of position, coming from a totally different environment. He was not familiar with the urban environment. I believe he was not successful—he was pleasant, nothing unpleasant about him. But I think that was a mistake. And since he didn't stay on as dean very long, it was only a couple of years, I think probably not a great deal of damage was done. It's all right to have faculty coming from different universities and even maybe if the dean is of a very specialized schools, music, art, whatever. But to have someone as the overall dean who didn't have urban experience, I think was a mistake.

COHEN: Henry Blumenthal was the next dean.

B. PRIMER: Well, he was a great—he was a friend. I don't think he was a friend in those days. He subsequently became a friend. But he was someone who was so fair-minded and who really could take the long view of things—you know he was a historian. And I think he handled things with finesse and with sympathy. And I know in the early days a number of the women faculty, that is the organized women faculty, mentioned to me that they felt that he was one of the people who would deal with them fairly and who did. And who was open-minded.

COHEN: Following Henry Blumenthal's tenure, Gilbert Panson served as acting dean for a year. Any perceptions there?

B. PRIMER: Not really. Although my few dealings with him I liked him, but I had no idea what he was like. I just really didn't know him as a dean at all.

COHEN: And then the next permanent appointment of a dean was the tenure of Richard Robey.

B. PRIMER: Yes, well, that was really I think a very sad thing because Robey was a bright, very bright young man brought from Columbia, as you know; where I believe he presided over the demise of the Linguistics Department at Columbia University. And he—I could be wrong about that—but I believe he was brought in, because he'd had urban experience, to make this more truly an urban campus and more responsive to the needs of its urban environment. He ran into a lot of difficulties. I'm not sure what they all were. Of course it was under his tenure that the classics people were let go, and that Rutgers-Newark ceased to have a Classics Department. That was the time when Margaret Minkin, who was a Greek scholar, was let go, when a very, very gifted scholar, a young man whose name escapes me at the moment, also—

COHEN: Also in linguistics?

B. PRIMER: Yes, classics.

COHEN: Horowitz?

B. PRIMER: Well, Frank Horowitz—I wasn't thinking of Frank—also lost his job. But I was thinking of someone else who has since died. He went off, and he taught in a variety of part-time jobs at NYU. So the Classics Department was disbanded. It had never been a big department. It had never been very successful. That tradition was not very strong at Rutgers in Newark, though of course Stringfellow Barr, who was quite an eminent man, had taught classics and ancient history at Rutgers-Newark for quite a long time.

COHEN: Right.

B. PRIMER: So there was a tradition. But it was never really big at Rutgers in Newark. But still, there were three people. And I think the reasoning behind that was that it was small. And that if one got rid of it, one could then have urban studies. It was kind of a tradeoff. I think his problems were also personal. He had some personal problems on campus. Nobody wished him—I certainly did not—wished him ill or an untimely death. But it was...I think it did accomplish certain things, and I'm sure they were all together positive because we do have urban studies. I think that was developed under Robey.

COHEN: Well, what was the opposition to Robey based on? I know there was a movement and a committee.

B. PRIMER: I don't know. I don't know whether it had to do with faculty prerogatives, whether this was the time when faculty were beginning to feel as if they were being overruled. I think before this time, for sure, whether rightly or wrongly, the faculty felt that they had a real say in the governance of the college. And one can also remember—I seem to remember under Dean Woodward—hearing that this campus was going to be *the* premier campus in Northern New

Jersey, Rutgers-Newark. And a lot of attention was going to be paid to it. Somehow it was going to be an elite kind of institution. And the faculty at one time were very excited about that. Now whether this was viewed, Robey's tenure, as the breakdown of that promise or the administration taking over from faculty and faculty power slowly becoming eroded, I really can't be sure.

COHEN: Yes. When you say Woodward promised, or the vision was of an elite campus in Newark?

B. PRIMER: Yes.

COHEN: How was that meant, I mean by elite. Elite in terms of enrollments or curriculum or what?

B. PRIMER: Kind of an elite liberal arts college, yes. Of course whether that was changed because of the changes in the early seventies, I don't know. But there was a sense that this campus was going to be built up and money was going to be funneled into it from the state and/or from New Brunswick.

COHEN: Yes.

B. PRIMER: And then somehow that—it didn't work in the way that it was supposed to work.

COHEN: I want to just take the question as far as the deans are concerned through Norman Samuels's tenure as dean before he became provost. And he followed Robey. And what can you say about that period?

B. PRIMER: I had very little to do with him. Very little to do. I can't—I don't think I had one conversation with him apart from occasionally meeting him at, you know, an annual party or a graduation party. The only dean into whose office I actually went [laughs] was Henry Blumenthal's and the current dean, David Hausberg [sp]—on what might be called business. Other than that, I never felt.... You see when you are a part-timer on that campus, you really belong to a species of underclass. And I don't know...well, perhaps this is personal, but I've heard virtually every part-timer respond in the same way. It doesn't matter if you've been a part-timer for twenty-five years, you still belong to another species. And you don't go in to see the dean. That's just not a thing which...perhaps other faculty might do for whatever reason. You're invited to faculty meetings, but you don't vote, and you're not, shall we say, required to attend. You have no responsibilities, no obligations. And conversely, nobody's really interested in your opinion. [Laughter] So on the whole subject of deans, I'm not very strong.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Okay. You may have something more to say about the Dana Library, though. What can you say about—well, let's divide it up. Let's start with collections. What have you found in the library—good and bad.

B. PRIMER: I found it adequate for student needs. I've also found the library helpful whenever I tried to get materials on interlibrary loan. Of course in my own field there's practically nothing. But then I can say that about a lot of libraries. [Laughs]

COHEN: Okay.

B. PRIMER: Renaissance materials, I mean the best materials are at Houghton Library or, you know, places like the British Library and the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. So I can't really criticize Dana too much on that score. And I've found the help—I've always found that the library lesson given to the freshmen is valuable. I've felt, however, that our students—

COHEN: Library instruction. What we call bibliographic instruction, yes.

B. PRIMER: Yes. I found that the students have not really availed themselves of the library in the way in which they should. It seems to me that one of the things a college graduate should know is really how to use a library. That's more important than mastery of the technicalities of one course because you're going to forget the details of a course. But if you have to look up something, if you have to do a little project on your own, you should know your way around a good library, you know, other than a local library. And I haven't felt that our students have achieved that. Now, I don't know that I can blame the library. After all, the instructors... I think this has to do with instruction. If every instructor sends his or her class to the library for a project over eight semesters, presumably the students would come away knowing how to use the library. So maybe it's really the instructional staff, and some of the fault here. I wish there were more seating space, more spaces for people who want to be quiet in the library.

COHEN: Yes.

B. PRIMER: You know. And the collections are, well, they need to be expanded, even in the more current, you know, contemporary fields. My own is perhaps a little too esoteric for the library.

COHEN: Your own field now—is it still Renaissance?

B. PRIMER: It's still Renaissance. Yes, I've gone back to that. I think that's where my heart is. Even though it's very difficult to find materials, I think it's worth the struggle.

COHEN: Have you used the interlibrary loan service in the Dana Library to any degree?

B. PRIMER: I have in the past, oh, yes. I have used interlibrary loan, and I found it to be satisfactory. What I think is more frustrating—interlibrary loan works. But the dependence on the Alexander Library can be difficult, especially for students. If they have to do a paper, to be told.... well, of course, one could say it's their own fault; they have to do a paper which is due Friday, and they start to work on Monday, and it takes two days to get the material from Alexander, you know.... I think it's a problem that so much of the material is located in Alexander, periodicals. It's true that one or two days is very good service, but the students don't view it as that. And the distance for them to go under pressure—you know go down to Alexander and check it, well, they just won't do it.

COHEN: What can you say about public services in the library: circulation department, the reference department, reference desk?

B. PRIMER: Well, not enough staff. At times it just needs... I mean you just need more staffing. I've found people always to be very helpful and to be knowledgeable. But at times when it is busy.... I think the circulation, the checkout, I don't think is up to the reference and the general help inside. The circulation is cumbersome, it's slow. If one person has a problem, you sit there indefinitely waiting, you know. But other than that, the services are very good.

COHEN: Anything that you'd like to go back to that we've talked about?

B. PRIMER: Yes, maybe you should remove what I've said about the administration. [Laughs] All the unfavorable bits. No, I think.... The thing that, of course, does strike me—and this is one of the big differences between Rutgers when I first came and Rutgers now—is the two-class system in the faculty. When I first came as an instructor, instructors really didn't have very much to do with senior professors. There was always a gap. You know we felt shy or young or inexperienced and so on. So I'm not saying that there are not some natural barriers which existed. But in the English Department, and I would daresay the same thing exists in any department which relies heavily on part-timers, there is a wide gulf between the so-called temporary people, many of whom have been there for many, many years, ten, fifteen, and twenty years, and the senior staff. It may not be intentional. It may be the product of simply overwork on the part of the faculty. Senior staff don't have a lot of time to cultivate this horde of part-timers that seems to be around. But whatever the reasons—and also many senior staff now come in, have two-day schedules. When you have a two-day schedule, all you can do is pant as you rush from class to class, and you do not have time either for other faculty or for students. It's not quite as vicious a system here as it is in some other colleges that I know about. But it's certainly true that there is this gap, a big gap, between the part-time, temporary people, who, as I say, temporary is an irony when some of these part-timers have been around for a long time and seem very firmly ensconced, may I say, except of course that they don't have tenure. That to me is a very big difference. And it does affect morale a great deal. The instructor in days of yore was a lowly instructor, often without a Ph.D. But there were prospects, maybe not of tenure, but of promotion. If you got your Ph.D., you could be an assistant professor, hurray!

[End of Tape #2]

COHEN: Back with Dr. Primer. You were saying about the—

B. PRIMER: Again, the general lack of communication between the part-timers, some of whom have Ph.D.'s and have expressed to me the feeling that the atmosphere is very unfriendly. The gap between them. And of course some of this has to do with the fact that we are a commuting campus. I don't know whether there exists on the Rutgers-Newark campus in individual departments—some departments have it; psychology does. They have monthly symposia where faculty get together and discuss their work or they have guest speakers. On other campuses, for instance Vassar College, I know the History Department, of which my sister is a member, has regular meetings where faculty discuss not their gripes, their hostilities, but where they talk informally about their work. But that's a residential campus. And that kind of thing is open to

anyone, whether a part-timer, a full-timer. Of course that particular campus of Vassar does not rely much on adjuncts; they're an occasional temporary person. But this is now the new university. What we have at Rutgers-Newark is a phenomenon which we've seen in a number of large universities, many, where the number of part-timers is much greater than the number of full-timers in the regular faculty, where lines are cut up to make the most of financial resources. So that you can have, you know, let's say twenty-five full-time faculty members and fifty to seventy-five part-timers in a given department like English. So I'm not, shall we say, I'm not blaming the full-time faculty. These are choices that are out of their hands to some extent. The organization of the department has relatively little to do with them. But it does not create a good feeling. It does not create a good morale within the department. And ultimately that has got to affect teaching, you know, the general atmosphere of the department.

COHEN: As far as the general atmosphere of the department is concerned, how does that department deal with the question of the diversity of interests either from the point of view of subject area, periods, genre, ideology, left, right, the whole spectrum, since it's so broad? Does this create a problem of alienation among people?

B. PRIMER: Well, I think there are hostilities within the department. That is inevitable in any corporate structure, which we've now become. You know maybe there are some people who don't speak to each other.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

B. PRIMER: That I certainly can't discuss—won't discuss. That's inevitable in the nature of the human being, I think. I don't think there are any more rifts because of that than you'd find in a science department, a Psychology Department. No, I don't think there is that.

COHEN: Well, one final question: Is there anything we have not talked about that you'd like to, I guess?

B. PRIMER: I think we've covered the main aspects of the Newark campus, except [laughs]—well, there is just one thing. I remember once coming back from a trip or vacation from a beautiful campus, and engaging the students in a discussion about how the physical environment affects their learning. Now, in the early days at Rutgers, as I've mentioned, we taught in all kinds of buildings, buildings that had been classroom buildings, that had not been, that were makeshift, that were mostly not very beautiful, you know. And then the campus was built. And it seems to me that one could have aimed for something better, in the sense that, yes, the plaza is not unattractive. I've had people tell me, you know, they come down to the Rutgers-Newark campus, and they're surprised at how nice it looks. But those classrooms! In all the years that we've had Hill Hall and Conklin Hall—Hill Hall—we have nothing but cinderblocks to look at. Nothing! Unadorned. More and more classrooms—both that are designed as classrooms have been taken up by administrative functions. That's another thing that I noticed. I substituted for a sick faculty member last spring. The classroom fronted on King Boulevard. It was so noisy you could not hear yourself think. Many of the more desirable classrooms have been taken for other functions. So that it seems to me that when you talk about teaching becoming peripheral, it's not just in the sense that faculty are doing research in preference to teaching, you know, as a more desirable

activity; but the physical environment for teaching is being made less and less agreeable. The classrooms are not air conditioned when they should be, or they're not heated when they should be. Generally they're overheated. The walls are ugly, they're bare, oh, well. I think this is important, too. And you can't hear yourself think. All this is related, and to me it makes a comment, it makes a statement that we do not have the best spaces available for teaching and learning.

COHEN: Dr. Primer, thank you very much.

[End of Tape #3]

-----[End of Interview]-----

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