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Interview with President Mike Garrison (full panel)
2/29/08, 8:57 a.m.
753 Engineering Sciences Building

Roy Nutter: Explained Jan Boyles' role as recorder. Also explained that information may be made public through Freedom of Information Act requests. Asked for Garrison's background.

Mike Garrison: Selected to the presidency last April. I began as president-elect on July 1. I served as the interim president until September. I started full-time on Sept. 1 working in that capacity. As for my background, I was a student at WVU. I have two degrees from here.

Art Centonze: Tell us when you first learned of the issue involving Heather Bresch. What transpired?

MG: I recalled from thinking back since it's become a public issue. I taught class on Thursday afternoons in fall semester – from 4-6:30 p.m. or so. When I was coming back from class, I was informed by a member of my staff. We had received multiple calls from Heather Bresch, a media source and Admissions/Records related to the inquiry about her degree. Folks in the office had taken the call. I don't think anyone talked to her at that point. We were trying to evaluate what the call entailed, what was the issue. I think that was Oct. 12. It was the second Thursday in October – whatever that date was. From there, I learned that there was an inquiry – an inquiry had been made of Admissions/Records. Admissions/Records had determined that Heather Bresch had no degree, but she had done work in the eMBA program. She believed that she had the degree. I had not spoken to her at this point. We were trying to contact folks in the College of Business. We were trying to determine if they had any information to say whether she did or didn't at that point. I'm trying to recall if anything else about it...

AC: Did you ask anybody on your staff to look into it?

MG: I can't recall if I asked someone or someone just grabbed hold of it, as may be the case. My chief of staff – Craig Walker – was informed and may have returned Ms. Bresch's call to follow up on what the issue was from her point of view. Jen Fisher also was on staff trying to help. Provost Lang was teaching class. We were trying to get Jerry into the mix, trying to figure out what the issues were.

AC: Had you returned her call?

MG: I did talk to her, but I can't recall if she placed the call. But I did talk to her about this briefly.

AC: Do you recall what she said?

MG: She was upset. She believed that she had the degree. She was upset it had become a public issue. She was embarrassed – that’s my interpretation – I think she was upset by it. I was apologetic that I felt that a university should be able to say, ‘Yes, you do’ or ‘No, you don’t [have a degree].’ We clearly weren’t able to do that. It was an embarrassment to me on behalf of the university.

Lori Franz: Did you have any information from her about why she had the degree?

MG: She said she went through the graduation ceremony. [The eMBA program] was geared toward those – who had learned – those in the workplace. She had been called out to trial for her employer. She made arrangements with individuals in that program. She made arrangements to receive credit for her work in the trial. She went through the grad ceremony. She believed she had the degree.

LF: You didn’t ask about the arrangements?

MG: I did not. I haven’t talked to her from that time. I explained to Craig Walker and others. I encouraged her – I told her, ‘Please explain that so that folks will know’ what her...

John Burkoff: When you talked, was that maybe after she had talked to Craig Walker?

MG: I’m sure she had talked to Craig Walker before. Not sure if...

JB: You used the word that she ‘believed’ she had the degree...

MG: There was no question in her mind. She said if anybody thinks that I’ve been promoted because of that degree, they are kidding themselves. I didn’t know if that was the case. She stated she had the degree. There was no equivocation.

RN: When did this conversation take place?

MG: Sometime Thursday or Friday.

RN: This would have been after hours?

MG: I don’t believe, but it could have been. I don’t remember the day it was. Actually, we talked about other things about the university, her job. I hadn’t talked a lot to her. She congratulated me again.

RN: You went to the same high school?

MG: Fairmont Senior – Class of 1987. I didn’t bring my yearbook...

AC: When were you informed of the decision that was made?

MG: The next week. Probably mid-week, but I can't remember when or the date. It was an awfully busy week for me. It was Homecoming and inauguration week. I wasn't very involved in any of this. When I received information that a decision had been made, there were steps in between with Craig, where Jerry said, 'The College of Business is not sure; they don't know.' I didn't have any special meetings. It was – here's the update on this. We had a number of media calls on this matter. Folks were updating me. It was out there a lot. If I got a question from the media, I wanted to be informed. My position was stated very clearly to Craig, Jerry – find out what we know. We know who she is. It's no secret she's the governor's daughter. I know her. It is what it is. They brought the dean, Paul Speaker and others in to see what they could find. They were asked to make a determination based on what information they had.

AC: But it was not reported as a slam dunk case?

MG: No. If you are asking me to give my sense of what they were doing, I'll give you my best try. There was absolute uncertainty because the folks didn't have – and I still believe this and I believe it today – you ought to be able to call the university where you attended and say what are the facts related to my attendance. We were not able to do that with any certainty within a reasonable time frame. There was still uncertainty from the folks in business. We had no way of knowing something that had happened nine years earlier. The student was saying one thing; Admissions/Records was saying one thing. We're saying we don't know. At the time, the program was in different hands. Jerry asked the dean to figure it out.

LF: When you talked with Heather, what did you tell her in terms of process?

MG: I apologized. I wasn't in a position to let her know if she had the degree or not. I said, 'Heather, I wasn't here at that time. Folks are taking a look at it as to what our records show.' She was upset because she felt she had structured an arrangement with her instructors. She mentioned a few times that I had this trial – my instructors – I called them "life credits" – she was to receive credits if she reported back.

Michael Lastinger: Did she mention any professors by name?

MG: Paul Speaker. I know now – that folks told me – he ran the eMBA program while she was there. She mentioned time and again that she had arrangements with Paul Speaker -- he knows this. And people were talking to them – wanted to let folks know should be able to determine, figure it out.

LF: When you talked to her did you say, 'We'll find out if you have the degree?'

MG: I had no way to know. I didn't dispute what she told me. I know what I was told by Craig and Jerry. They had a meeting. I apologized more than anything else. I'm sorry that we can't say...

AC: Did you speak to her after the determination was made?

MG: I did not.

JB: Have you spoken to her any since then?

MG: On Homecoming week, at a football game – I saw her briefly. I did not speak to her about this. She didn't press me. She pressed me on really what kind of operation is this – I said, 'Heather, if you have the facts and you know what you know you need to communicate what you know.'

JB: Did she ever communicate what she knew?

MG: To my knowledge, I don't know. I know she talked to Craig. We were trying to get information from her, from provost back to the dean. It maybe was not the most efficient route. I assumed that at some point she would be talked to first hand.

ML: Would you give us again the impression of the route of communication that she was taking?

MG: I had one conversation with her. I know she did talk to Craig. Craig was talking to her. She was under pressure from the media to answer the question -- Do you have it? Do you not have it? My sense from her response was that she felt pressured to say she did have it. She believed she had the degree. Craig met with Jerry to indicate to Jerry everything that he knew. My understanding is that he brought the dean and others from B&E, and said, here's our situation.

AC: Are you familiar with Leah Summers?

MG: I am.

AC: What is her role?

MG: I only learned this second hand – I know she has an eMBA as well. She was in the program at the same time as Heather. Leah works at Mylan in charge of government relations. I worked with her as a lawyer in my private practice. She was in the meeting with Heather and Paul Speaker when the arrangements were made.

RN: Does either of them offer any details of what arrangements had been made?

MG: We never talked about the arrangements. My understanding is the arrangements that she could be in time – not sure if it was a semester or a year or a summer and a semester – she was to receive life credit for her involvement in a class action lawsuit. She was involved materially with Mylan. I didn't make a judgment call.

RN: Did you hear this from Craig Walker?

MG: I think it was. I don't remember Heather saying anything like that.

LF: Did you ask her about any arrangements?

MG: No.

LF: Was she registered for coursework?

MG: No.

LF: Did she receive a diploma?

MG: No. She did have some opinions. I would assume she would have a diploma if she graduated...it would matter to her to determine. Some people don't take the world as serious as other people. I still have my transcript from undergrad. It's a serious thing in my world. I know Heather. We're not as close as what folks like to believe. It surprises me that she didn't follow up on it since graduation. That's not a criticism, just an observation.

LF: For a person at her level, would she follow verbal arrangements with written documents? Most people would say, this is pending, I want to make sure it happens.

MG: She never did. I can't imagine what was in her mind in 1998. I heard a lot of observations about how the program worked.

ML: What have you heard?

MG: The executive MBA program was geared toward folks in the workplace. I have heard the Heather's not the only student in this situation. I don't know this directly. I have never looked at any information – others are aware of this. When this was investigated, folks said, 'Yeah, this happened to other students.'

ML: What do you mean by 'this happened to other students?'

MG: She had credits that weren't reflected at Admissions and Records and hadn't made it into the file at B&E – that's what I've heard about the program during that time.

RN: Whom did you hear that from?

MG: It was conveyed to Craig, Jerry.

RN: Do you know the original source?

MG: I think the dean may have said that at one point. There was another student this summer.

RN: One student?

MG: A student. It could affect other students. Now let me add my thoughts on that because I happen to be the president here. That worries me greatly. If the committee determines whether she did or did not earn the degree – if this committee finds that this is the case, I surely want to know about it. We can't go back and change how it's dealt with. I don't have an impression. I never talked with Paul Speaker or the dean. I plan to – at least with the dean...

LF: She had [REDACTED] credits in a [REDACTED] credit program.

MG: I never went into – I have this many hours, I have that many...

LF: That was floating in the press.

MG: I did not learn that from the press. I have since learned.

LF: Did you have conversations with the provost about [REDACTED] hours in the degree program?

MG: Maybe everybody can get one – I've been doing a lot of work – what are the parameters? I know well enough not to second guess academic programs. From the business standpoint, from a controls standpoint, you need to have controls and parameters on how that works.

LF: Did you have any conversations with Lang?

MG: Asked about how do life credits work. His response – it could have been in that program in early days. All that happened nine years later.

LF: Did you have any talk about life credits? Did you have concern about the academic issue?

MG: Yes, I had concern about academics. From a broader issue of how – these programs are not embedded into undergrad. We need take a look at how we do grad programs -- how Admissions/Records credits go down – how does Admissions/Records work. Can anybody go down there and get a transcript?

LF: So it was more of a process issue?

MG: It was an issue about how it affects academic quality.

AC: After a decision was made, who was responsible for communicating that decision?

MG: In my understanding, Dean Sears was responsible for saying the decision. My understanding is that he was to make the decision. Without equivocation, guys, this is

going to have heightened scrutiny. The press was calling. It didn't matter if she was Heather Smith – we have folks who know, and will make a determination, and we'll go from there.

AC: After the decision was made, did someone come back to you?

MG: As I said earlier, someone said she had the degree.

AC: Did you have any discussions with the governor?

MG: We had a discussion in late December, right after it came out in the media. It was actually related to the coaching search. He was talking to me about that. Was asked about this issue. It was communicated to his office after the fact, after it came out in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette – they were the first paper to have it. I did talk to him about it. He said she didn't tell me [Manchin] anything about it. I said, she wouldn't tell you anything about it.

JB: He didn't mention she had attended graduation?

MG: I didn't ask him. We have a very open and frank relationship. The only thing that he did stress to me is that we have to make sure that we have all the information. It was the governor's suggestion to be open and transparent.

ML: Did you have "all the information"?

MG: There were questions as to that. I trusted Jerry's judgment on it. Jerry trusted the dean's judgment. It has since been conveyed to me that the dean made the best decision he could with the available information.

ML: There is a difference between all the information and the information available.

MG: The decision was based on all the accurate information. We weren't the keepers of that information. It was at Admissions/Records. We wanted to make sure everything was done in a complete and thorough way. We wanted to make sure it was a review of the program. It has since shifted toward that degree.

RN: John, you're awful quiet...

JB: The WVU Foundation – were there any conversations with anyone involved in fundraising? Was there pressure from people at the Foundation?

MG: No.

JB: Did you speak with Wayne King?

MG: We e-mailed about Heather potentially being on the Foundation. We never had a conversation about how it would affect fundraising.

JB: During that time, did you receive any calls from the Foundation about how it would affect fundraising?

MG: No. Let me make sure I'm looking at everything. Any comments from people in Foundation were given to the president's board.

JB: It's hard to believe they were silent.

MG: They said, 'Can't you just resolve it?' They weren't silent. They said, 'You're the CEO – make the call.' That's the reason we have an independent committee so that we don't do that. Foundation members are normally former CEOs.

JB: This was all after the fact...

MG: It never was something that we widely discussed in any way – not with the governor, not with Mike Puskar. There were no discussions with the governor until late December. I did have – there was a discussion with Wayne King about the Foundation board. Over the next three years, [it] will have half of its members transition off because of age and term limits. Heather and/or someone from Mylan was identified as a good member. Someone in a different generation might provide good Foundation board membership. Asked her of her interest in that in December.

AC: Was she interested?

MG: I think she was. I asked for her resume. I never forwarded it to Wayne.

LF: When talking about your conversations with Heather, it wouldn't have surprised you if she wouldn't have followed up...is that a comment on a personality characteristic?

MG: Yes. Having a degree on her wall -- it was never important to her. I don't recall having any classes with her in her undergrad career. Heather was more focused on getting out, getting into the workplace. She worked all the time. There was not a lot of contact from when she graduated and when I graduated. It didn't surprise me.

LF: You're not implying she was disorganized or chaotic...

MG: It was not a priority to her. Some people display them [diplomas] on the wall.

LF: Would that carry over to her not understanding what her obligations of the degree were?

MG: She went through graduation.

LF: As president, do you believe going through graduation gets the degree?

MG: Most people would think that – it just happened in December. Man went through ceremony, went out for job interviews – he was told he was two credits short. His mom and dad called our office. [REDACTED] I asked, 'Have you checked with A/R?' Craig and Katie Utterback, our parent advocate, had to break it to her that he wasn't finished. A/R had that information. Do I think most people not associated with university gets it, yeah, I do.

AC: Did the student not know he was two credits short?

MG: I never talked to the student. I know what she conveyed. It's an example of how it comes into our office. There are countless numbers...one this fall. Someone up for promotion – a 60-something person in Washington state. Had master's or Ph.D. Called A/R for transcript and only got undergrad [transcript]. I got with Craig. Katie sent to Jerry. It was not [initially] found by A/R, but later found.

JB: When you finally heard the decision, did you assume it was Jerry?

MG: Craig Walker or Jerry Lang.

JB: Sears said, 'We don't know what happened, but the ties should go to the student.'

MG: The dean suggested he gathered all the information that he could. He didn't have everything that he hoped to have. The student had it. It couldn't be disproved. So the ties go to the student. The only thing I asked, I did say, 'Let's be clear – it's their decision.' Either Craig told me or Jerry said, 'I asked everyone in the room, 'Are you comfortable with this?' I didn't ask Jerry.

ML: He asked everyone?

MG: Yes.

ML: But you weren't there.

MG: Craig's job is like an air traffic controller. Craig was not asked. It's not his role.

JB: If you had heard that, would it be appropriate for ties to go to the student?

MG: If you are a university, you can't disprove. You would hope that the student would provide what they might have.

JB: At that point, you delegated it. But you heard there's a tie...

MG: It was not up to me to hold up. The decision was made by the dean.

AC: It was reported that the dean was to complete a transcript with courses and grades that may or may not have been received.

MG: It is not clear what was done. I never looked at a transcript other than what I read in some of the media reports. I wasn't sure if I had a full understanding other than in generalities. The transcript said [REDACTED] hours and there were going to – it was an assumption – be credits given for the time she spent during that trial. It was never explained back to me the details of how it was going to go.

JB: Did you talk to Bill Case before this meeting?

MG: I just asked him where Room 753 was.

JB: Did you talk to Craig Walker?

MG: No. I encouraged Craig Walker and Bill -- I said to Bill, 'Tell the truth. Tell everything you know.' We want this to be resolved. From my point of view, as a university and as president, I think there must be actions to make sure we have quality controls. It's a no-win situation as a university. That's the hand we've been handed. Process flawed or ties go... whatever you say.

RN: There's a website – verifydegree.com. Heard of it?

MG: I haven't heard of it.

RN: Another one for you. I have a name: [REDACTED]

MG: I'm not sure I know a [REDACTED].

RN: We have an e-mail with a resume for [REDACTED]

MG: Is he a Fairmont guy? [Pauses] I know who he is. He's a guy who came to meet with me in May or June. He wanted a job. I'm not sure I wanted to know what he wanted. He wanted to work a program through B&E -- job training related. The bottom line: He listed Heather as his reference and other people I know from Fairmont. I met with him. [REDACTED]

RN: He knew Heather Bresch?

MG: He was married to someone that was in high school around the same time around when Heather and I went to school – that's it. He's older than I am.

Interview ending time: 9:52 a.m.