

Interview with Steve Sears
1/17/08, 4 p.m.
203 Chitwood

Interview start time: 4:10 p.m.

Roy Nutter: Explained Jan Boyles' role as recorder.

RN: Describe overview of service in the West Virginia University College of Business and Economics.

Steve Sears: Chose to come to WVU. Received Ph.D. in BUSA from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1980. Taught at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for nine years. Father died, worked with assuming family business. Wanted opportunity to seek academic appointment closer to home. Taught at Texas Tech from 1998-2005. Started the Institute for Banking and Financial Studies. Promoted from full professor, director, department chair to dean. Shared dean's title in 2001. Got call from Boston-based search firm in March 2005. Visited WV for first time in April 2005. Offered position in May 2005. Started Aug. 15, 2005.

SS: "Still learning about WV politics. Now I appreciate better how sensitive these issues can be."

RN: Can you explain more?

SS: "Sure. To me, this has always been an academic matter. It's been the messiest academic matter that I've ever seen in my life." Problems with record keeping, discretionary authority. Left with real questions about process.

SS: On Oct. 5, Bresch promotion at Mylan made public. Received Internet source – 3-4 page document about promotion. Paid attention because know Mike Puskar. Gave gift to COB – \$1.5M. To be used for development, external relations. Puskar likes to meet with Sears to receive updates on the college, strategic plan.

SS: Received call while at Women of Color luncheon. Left on voicemail with administrative associate, Lana Cantoni. Forwarded to Sears' voicemail. Both Cantoni and Sears listened to message. Inquiry from Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Sears contacted Jerry Lang and Craig Walker.

SS: A statement was sent to the media on Oct. 22. Believes was a Monday. Less than two weeks from not knowing anything to trying to piece together what her record was like.

SS: Two informal meetings were held in the COB. Meeting with Jerry Blakely, Cy Logar. Sears wanted to see Bresch's academic record. Met with Board of Advisors on Oct. 11 or 12. Sent e-mail to Walker. Hadn't grasped "how high this was going to be a profile issue."

SS: Involved in two formal meetings.

1. Participants: Walker, Sears, Cy Logar, Blakely, Bill Case, maybe Alex Macia. Knew it was a "highly politicized matter." Bill [Case] there to draft response. Result – COB was "looking into the matter."
2. Participants: Lang, Macia, Paul Speaker, Walker, Sears, Logar, Blakely. Gathered information. Relied on statements made by Speaker.

RN: Was this triggered by an inquiry to Admissions and Records?

SS: "I think they bothered me cause I'm the dean."

RN: Why bother the college?

SS: Before the decision was made, began contacting everyone. Calling professors. Asking for lists of students. Find anyone with information. Wanted to validate this. Obtained list of people in her cohort. Over time, anecdotal comments – "I remember her or I don't remember her."

SS: Information was presented to me. "This stuff is too crazy to make up."

SS: "For reasons that sounded ok," began moving records to find more office space. Jess Mancini charged over summer to consolidate storage space. Asked by graduate programs about files. Mancini issued directive in Summer 2007. Shred old files. Met with Blakely and Logar to see how far back files go.

SS: Sometime between 1998-2007, records were transferred to electronic form. "Not all records survived, which is bothersome to me."

SS: During discussion on University records, it was found that Bresch had [REDACTED]. Speaker brought what found in records. Sears fired Speaker on Sept. 11, 2006. Actually, Sears gave him the opportunity to resign. "I was uncomfortable with his style of leadership and the degree of autonomy that he had." During interim period, had private conversations/conferred with Lang on Speaker's successor.

SS: Speaker said that [REDACTED] of courses should have [REDACTED].

RN: Why were the grades not at Admissions and Records?

SS: "I asked that question, too. No answer was given." Told they had been "overlooked."

SS: So for an [REDACTED], there were [REDACTED]. There was a [REDACTED]. The credit was never transferred to Admissions and Records. Courses: [REDACTED].

RN: And those two courses had different instructors, correct?

SS: That's right. Grades were on her records [in the COB], but not at Admissions/Records. For example: [REDACTED].

RN: (refers to BUE 4) Asks about courses labeled with a triple asterisk.

SS: [REDACTED] hours of [REDACTED] hours were "[REDACTED]" Found actual grades, including one course identified as independent study - [REDACTED].

RN: Asks about [REDACTED] - taught by [REDACTED]. How find grade for this course?

SS: According to [REDACTED], he was also a [REDACTED] for [REDACTED] - [REDACTED] [REDACTED] - along with [REDACTED]. Grade for the course was reported by [REDACTED]. Grade received, but not sent to Admissions/Records. In Spring 1997, [REDACTED] taught [REDACTED] didn't have grade roll or gradebook. [REDACTED] "decided the grades had been received, but should have been transferred."

SS: Remaining [REDACTED] hours. Told according to records, [Bresch's] name appeared on graduation list. Since making the decision, more information available. Now not sure if name was on graduation list or not. Individuals attested her [Bresch's] name was not on deficiency list. Told that [Bresch] participated in graduation ceremonies.

RN: Is it normal that a student would have [REDACTED] hours of remaining coursework to participate in graduation?

SS: Answer from Speaker - no.

Michael Lastinger: Why would a student be allowed to walk in that circumstance?

SS: Asked Speaker and no answer.

SS: Craig Walker had talked to Heather Bresch independent of Sears. [Walker] wanted to make sure that Bresch was comfortable with information released for privacy reasons.

SS: "There's no question that Bresch was away from campus a lot" during Fall 1998. Serving as a witness in a case in California. Not sure how much time she was gone.

SS: Walker talked to Bresch. Bresch said she had a meeting with Speaker in December 1998. Bresch also allegedly said there was a witness to this meeting - Leah Summers.

RN: What do you know about Leah Summers?

SS: "I don't know about Leah." Initially student in the eMBA program. She may have taught in the program. Mylan employee.

SS: In this meeting with Speaker, Bresch allegedly related that she missed a lot of classes. She asked Speaker what she needed to do to make up the work. Speaker allegedly told her, "Everything is fine." Bresch interpreted that everything was done. She assumed that she was going to receive experiential credit.

SS: Sears asked Speaker, "What did you say? Did you mean it that way?" Most of the "participants [in the eMBA program] are practicing professionals." In addition, through [Sears'] experience – people in the program are at "transition points" in their lives. Many going through divorce, tired of doing current work, seeking additional credentials. Job opportunities come up midway through the program and students need to move.

SS: "In interest of the student" COB officials often make "workout plans" of work to be completed. The workout plan "should be legitimate."

SS: Sears asked Speaker if he had prepared a workout plan for Bresch. Speaker responded yes. But can't find it. Walker said that "Summers could attest to the same interpretation as Bresch."

ML: Why was there a witness at this meeting?

SS: "It's significant. I don't know. It adds another level of he said/she said."

SS: At the meeting, asked Jerry [Blakely] and Paul – do you know anything else? Documents had been transferred to zip drive. Have top IT person in COB working to find any documents on zip drive.

SS: Did not contact Heather Bresch. Was new to WV and a new dean. Has not talked to governor, Mike Puskar, Mike Garrison or Bresch. "In my view, I acted as interpreter of the information. I received the facts." Bresch had [REDACTED] hours. Should have been [REDACTED] hours, according to Speaker. She appeared on the graduation list. She did not appear on the deficiency list. With the meeting with Speaker in December [1998], she was told that everything was fine. She interpreted this as meaning that 'you're done.' So "on the basis of what I have, I have to agree that she's graduated."

SS: Had one hour separate meetings. One with Craig Walker. One with Jerry Lang. "It's a set of messy situations. We may not find all the pieces to this puzzle."

SS: Told by Lang to "make the best decision that you can make."

SS: Asked to provide statement to respond to Post-Gazette. Received suggestions from Bill Case. Asked Jerry [Lang] what to do. Needed to [REDACTED] [Bresch's] transcript. Sought guidance on what to do about [REDACTED]. Understood rule was that [REDACTED]."

SS: "I did not receive any pressure of a political nature from [Mike] Puskar or [Mike] Garrison. I did feel pressure to make some decision very soon. The kind of information that I had was not the kind of info that I wanted."

SS: When finished with meeting, asked Cy Logar and Blakely to meet in conference room. Asked for "complete internal audit" of every student who had participated in eMBA program. Wanted to focus on incomplete grades, independent study courses.

SS: Provided panel with copy of his internal charge to COB.

SS: Speaker used large degree of discretion with students. Sears wants the "structure and integrity of workout plans preserved." Internal charge will look at experiential learning and independent study credit. Questions to consider: Who changes incomplete grades? What is the content of independent study courses? And what is the amount of substitution that has been permitted over time?

SS: "Ours is a lockstep program." Students take classes in order with cohort. "We understand that we need to work with students, but we also need to construct workout plans in an appropriate way."

SS: Director leads a lot of independent study credits himself. "But he can't waive a wand and say everything's fine." Describes audit will start with current day and work backward.

ML: *Questions process of audit. Why not start with beginning of program and work toward current day?*

SS: Explains that they will "hit brick wall somewhere." Making progress so far. Has "real concerns going forward."

SS: Trying to find at least three verifiable copies of records – University, college, faculty. Two types of faculty involved in matter – people that left and did not get tenure and people who remain. Of those remaining, two opinions – some "don't remember her" and some "don't keep record books."

SS: Problem – rosters were not always accurate. Another problem – payments were not always collected in a timely fashion. Courses didn't always start August and January. Payments were not always due at the beginning of the semester. Students could continue until payment was made.

SS: Told by Provost that [Bresch] had paid for fall semester. Bresch was employee of Mylan, and it wasn't sure who was paying.

SS: "This is your high profile student meeting your worst manager."

SS: Concerned that there could be other potential COOs, in which there could be potential inquiries.

ML: Is there a form that the dean signs for incomplete grades?

SS: Now there is. "There are so many stones that we could throw at ourselves."

ML: There is a form from Admissions/Records.

SS: We know of at least one other student who had incomplete courses that were changed.

SS: Meeting with faculty/staff Tuesday. "Engaged with finding the weaknesses in the program." Needs to be a better process for record keeping, incomplete forms, committee that reviews curriculum. The director of the program will oversee our independent studies. Need to check on student grades of "I."

SS: "If there was a better process, it should have come to light 8-8.5 years ago. We are going to change the way we do business. It's frustrating when you don't have all the information." Worried about how many other students are impacted.

RN: Don't you think a student would realize that he/she doesn't have a diploma? Wouldn't this person need to get a transcript to get a job?

SS: Typical case. "Some people are not as concerned with a diploma. Some people are more interested in experience and professional development." Walker asked Bresch about the issue – but she was not looking for the diploma. Was working for Mylan for five or six years before she entered the program. She put the degree on her resume. "I don't know if that made an impact on the decision for her to be promoted to COO."

RN: Questions the panel must deal with – Did she have a degree or not? How many more students may be in similar circumstances? What happened in October 2007 – was there political pressure?

ML: Why did Craig Walker play a role in these meetings?

SS: Don't know.

SS: Only two people know the answers – Speaker and Bresch. And Summers.

ML: If there is the possibility of several cases, what impact does that have on COB accreditation. The accreditation agency has said that it will not get involved if it's an individual case. But what if this is more widespread than one individual?

SS: Still in process of looking at records. Second cohort to go through program. At time, relatively brand new program. "Based upon this case, we don't seem to be finding

definitive information from faculty.” Reactions from faculty – don’t remember on roster. Met with grad director. “We’ve got to be able to connect more dots.” Based on conversation between Speaker and Bresch, that “was another piece of information that gave me pause for thought.”

RN: Wouldn't Bresch have documentation if completed coursework? Wouldn't she have term papers?

ML: How many students were in her cohort?

SS: Five cohorts in operation. 2.5 year program. Roughly 160 students across all five cohorts. About 30 students/cohort. Each cohort – two locations in WV. Take program to students. Greater demands on faculty – must travel to location.

ML: For auditing – Why not start looking at first cohort and move to present?

SS: Records look good for last two years.

ML: Suggested process for audit – Obtain list of cohort. Look at transcripts from Admissions/Records. Compare to graduation list. Shouldn't take long. How did other students get a diploma if their transcript was not complete?

SS: That’s one of the suggestions in his internal charge. Meeting with whole college scheduled for next Tuesday. “We want to act with transparency.”

ML: Asks Sears to provide a list of students in Bresch's cohort. If someone paid for the class, but did not appear on the roster – how was that handled? Or let's say that a student completed some coursework and had paid fees. How were these situations handled?

SS: That’s part of the meeting that we had in October. “No one found validation of payment.”

ML: “I know you can’t get a diploma with a \$3 parking fine.”

SS: Record keeping was “lax.” Students could register for courses without making payments.

SS: General conclusions:

1. “We failed on recordkeeping.”
2. Individuals in the College had “too great a level of autonomy.” Need better management on class rosters.
3. “Poor management in general.”

RN: Sounds like there was a “lack of checks and balances.”

SS: Concerned about "I" grades remaining on student transcripts. New COB policy in place. But concerned with Admissions/Records policy: If "I" doesn't get changed, it will be computed as an "F." But why doesn't A/R change "I" to "F"?

SS: "Shouldn't the University bring closure to a record like that?" A/R should contact the student, inform him/her of remaining incomplete grades.

SS: If accept as true that Bresch believes that she completed all the degree requirements, why would she go back to A/R to check on that?

SS: A/R should have process to send form letter to students. "If that were in place, 8-8.5 years ago, we wouldn't have this situation today."

ML: Need to revisit course catalog for policy on computing "I" grades. "University may have a general problem" of not following established procedures regarding incompletes.

SS: "It's really a correspondence issue."

SS: "I made the best decision regarding the information that I had. I tried to make a decision based on information, not based on personal speculation as to motives. What troubled me was how people rearranged personal beliefs and called them truth. I just didn't have good information."

SS: Faculty should be required to hold records longer. Concerned by issue of A/R correspondence. "It [the matter] was sitting there for nine years. It could have sat there forever." But Bresch's promotion was the catalyst for looking into matters.

ML: Do you know how the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette got involved?

SS: Mylan Labs issued a statement regarding that matter. Provided by Mylan's legal counsel. Statement was in support of Bresch. Reporter has "problem history" with Mylan. Understanding by Mylan that specific reporter would not get assigned to write articles on the company. Possible – business community doesn't like Mylan's new CEO. Doesn't know who would have motive to talk to paper. Someone in University? Someone passed over for job?

RN: Course catalog says courses are good for seven years. If a student starts with a cohort and doesn't finish, can a student finish the following semester?

SS: Allowed for certain students.

RN: If took a course in 1997, and it didn't count then – why can it count in 2007? Believes seven or eight year limit of counting courses.

SS: Scheduled Bobbi Brandt to come and talk to COB senior management about FERPA.

Interview ending time: 5:27 p.m.