

David M. Grether Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Heidi Aspaturian

2017 to 2018

ABSTRACT

David Grether (1938–2021), professor of economics, emeritus, discusses his life and career and shares his thoughts and observations about the role and evolution of liberal arts studies at Caltech from his unique vantage point as two-time chair of Caltech’s Division of Humanities and Social Sciences (1982–1992, 2006–2007). The complex collegial and institutional relationship between Caltech’s lone liberal arts division and its five science/engineering divisions on the one hand, and between the humanists and social scientists grouped together within HSS, on the other, is a recurring theme of this retrospective.

Grether recalls his upbringing in Berkeley, California, and the roots of his early interest in social and economic problems, leading to undergraduate and graduate study in economics at UC Berkeley and Stanford respectively, and to several years as assistant professor of economics at Yale. Joining Caltech’s economics faculty in 1971, he gradually shifted much of his research focus from econometrics to behavioral economics and was instrumental in establishing the new field of experimental economics at Caltech in the 1970s. He talks about his impressions of the campus and numerous colleagues during these early years, and about the atmosphere in HSS during a time of significant transition, marked by the introduction of a PhD program in social science, differences over the future direction

of the division, and the contrasting personal styles and academic agendas of consecutive HSS division chairs H. Smith, R. Huttenback, and R. Noll, whom he succeeded as chair in 1982.

Grether's detailed account of his experiences as HSS chair includes his interactions with a succession of Caltech provosts (J. Roberts, R. Vogt, B. Kamb, and P. Jennings), as well as faculty recruitment, fundraising, the expansion or introduction of research programs in the history of science, Asian studies, and neuroeconomics, the controversy surrounding the 1985 closure of Caltech's Baxter Art Gallery, and a recap of related academic, administrative, and personnel issues. The oral history concludes with an overview of Grether's later research work, his involvement in campus faculty committees, most notably his tenure as chair of the undergraduate admissions committee, and general reflections on his Caltech career.

NOTE TO READERS

Oral history interviews provide valuable first-hand testimony of the past. The views and opinions expressed in them are those of the interviewees, who describe events based on their own recollections and from their own perspective. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Caltech Archives and Special Collections or of the California Institute of Technology.

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<http://resolver.caltech.edu/CaltechOH:OH.Grether.D>

David M. Grether, undated. *Photograph by Van Urfalian*

SESSION I, DECEMBER 13, 2017

Family background & upbringing in Berkeley, California; attends UCB for college

HEIDI ASPATURIAN: I usually start by asking about your family background, a little about your family history, where you were raised, and so on. So tell me a little about your parents and where you grew up.

DAVID GREETHER: I grew up in Berkeley, California. My father [Ewald Grether] was on the Berkeley faculty in the economics department and the business school. The family name is German, as you might guess—our family had come over about the time of the Franco-Prussian War. He came from a reasonably long line of ministers; I think he was the first one in three generations who was not a minister. All the males down to him had been ministers at some point.

My mother's family was from Montana, and her father was a cattle rancher—cattle and sheep. The families had lived in an area called the Bitterroot Valley, south of Missoula, which is where the University of Montana is located. My father went to the University of Nebraska and then to graduate school at Berkeley, where he basically spent the rest of his life. He visited

more places and all that sort of thing, but that was always his home base. My mother had gone to the University of Montana and was also a graduate student at Berkeley. That's how they met.

ASPATURIAN: The rest is history. So you grew up in Berkeley. You attended the public schools there?

GRETHER: I attended public schools there—that's what you did then, typically. With the current generation, things have changed, but at that time everybody went to public schools.

ASPATURIAN: What stands out in your mind, educationally, about your early life? Did you have particular interests?

GRETHER: I went to Berkeley for college because that's where we lived. I guess I could have gone to Stanford, which at that time cost \$250 a quarter. My father said that was too expensive, so I would have to get a job. [Laughter] He clearly preferred me to go to Berkeley, and so I did. Now while there—what is it you want to know?

Early interest in social scientific & economic problems

ASPATURIAN: What did you study there? How did your interests evolve?

GRETHER: I guess, first of all, I became interested in what you might call social scientific or economic problems—not knowing that that’s what I was interested in, particularly.

ASPATURIAN: Was this somewhat of a parental influence as well?

GRETHER: It *was* kind of dinner table conversation. We would discuss, why, for example, a drug store sells so much more than drugs. I remember we discussed this once or twice—how there’s a counter where they fill prescriptions and sell over-the-counter medication. But they also sell toasters and costumes and tableware, and so on. Why is that? Those were the kinds of things we would discuss. In some sense, I gravitated to those kinds of topics. As an undergraduate, I actually ended up studying in the business school, as opposed to economics. Both places required you to take a statistics class, and I remember taking that class and being really fascinated by the early parts of it and not liking the latter part of it because it was a non-calculus course. Once you got beyond understanding the basic probability things, it all became like a cookbook—how you did stuff. I was unsatisfied with that. I really liked the subject, but it was clear that it wasn’t satisfactory to study it unless you had the right mathematical background.

ASPATURIAN: You mentioned calculus. Did you have an aptitude for math?

GRETHER: I was told by a high school teacher I did, but whether that was true, I have no idea.

ASPATURIAN: But science did not interest you. You preferred the social sciences?

GRETHER: I never dreamed of being a physicist. The kinds of things we would talk about at home were in some sense, I'm sure, much more social, political, and economics subjects.

Coursework at Berkeley; analytic studies in statistical labs

And so I took courses in economics and business, and I decided to bring my math background up a bit, and I worked on that. In the business school, you had to take the basic classes—macroeconomics, microeconomics, and introductory courses in several fields. Marketing, production management, accounting—there were a number of things you had to take, and you also had to specify what they called a field of emphasis or concentration—where you took three courses, I think it was. One of the concentration options was statistics, and I thought, “Oh, I'll do that.”

So I took a year's course that required calculus and statistics, and I really liked that. You were also required to take economics statistics—Economics 122, I think it was—which was offered usually in the second term each year. I was a senior by the time I went to take the course, and it wasn't offered. I looked in the catalog to figure out whether there was something I could credibly substitute for it. I found something called Economics

222, with the same title, but the “2” meant it was a graduate course. So I went to see the professor, Dale Jorgenson, who was a relatively new professor from Harvard, and explained my problem. I told him I didn’t have the prerequisite for his class, which was another statistics course that didn’t require calculus. I told him what I was taking, and he said, “That’s much better; just go take this and you can take my class.” So I did. I was the only undergraduate in there. I didn’t know any of the other students, of course; I just did the class assignments.

The assignments were very hard, and in those days—this would have been 1960—computers existed, but you didn’t have access to them. If you were given an assignment that involved running statistical analysis of some data, you worked in what were called statistical labs, which were rooms with mechanical calculators, ten-by-ten, so you had ten rows and ten columns. They were all chained to the table so you wouldn’t steal them—well, they were pretty heavy. To do this stuff was very time-consuming and quite unpleasant, but I got pretty good at it. I remember one assignment where it turned out that one woman in the class and I were the only people who had done it. The others hadn’t gotten around to finishing it; it was too hard. The professor asked her if she had checked her results, and she said, no, and he said, “You might want to check ’em because if it’s right, it’s publishable, since you’ve shown that oranges are an inferior good, which is obviously nonsense.” I didn’t know if my solution was right or not, but I thought it was.

In addition to doing calculations in that class and learning some theory, we read a lot of empirical studies, so I learned how to do that. Which is something most people never learn how to do. It's hard to do.

ASPATURIAN: Do any of these studies stand out in your mind particularly?

GREETHER: No. What does stand out in my mind is that he would ask us, "What was that study about?" and whomever he called on would sort of regurgitate what the introduction said was going on and what the conclusion said, and he then would start quizzing them about whether these were the right data, what was done with them, what would you have done with them—all kinds of questions. Making you think through everything. That's hard. I kind of liked that.

Work with agricultural economist G. Kuznets deepens understanding of social science problems

At the same time that I was taking that class, I got a job as—I guess you'd call it a statistical clerk. I was an undergraduate, so I wasn't a research assistant. I worked for a guy named George Kuznets.

ASPATURIAN: This was a faculty member?

GREETHER: A faculty member in agricultural economics. He was very smart and very nice, and he was always very careful to

make sure that the people who worked for him understood what they were doing and why. That was very educational. He was working on forecasting crops in California.

ASPATURIAN: Growth patterns?

GRETHER: No. How many oranges were there going to be.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, I see. Productivity.

GRETHER: Productivity. And I particularly remember one problem that we worked on. We would sit in his office with these ten-by-ten calculators and work on forecasting the peach crop. We needed to know the volume of the crop because in those days almost all peaches were canned—they don't have a long shelf-life. And so the canneries want to know basically at the beginning of the season how many freight-loads of cans and how much sugar they've got to order because they would pack the peaches in sugar syrup. Some years earlier, they had devised a very elaborate random sampling process early in the picking season to get an estimate of the size of the crop, and they were consistently over-estimating the size on the order of 10 to 15 percent. Kuznets was trying to figure out why this was. We were doing quite complicated calculations, and I remember he explained the reason to me while we were doing this. It was because the workers who picked the peaches were paid not by the hour but by the box.

ASPATURIAN: How many peaches they can put in a box?

GRETHER: Yeah. You see when you get a full box, that's a unit and you get paid so much per unit. He assumed that later on, of course, they were limited to picking what's left, but that at the beginning they tended to pick the bigger peaches to fill the boxes faster.

ASPATURIAN: Makes sense.

GRETHER: That makes sense. So we were basically trying to find—you've got a distribution—take like the normal curve of the diameters of peaches but it's being truncated: Somewhere, you're getting an under-sampling of the lower size. So we were trying to work out what the right figure was. That was a fairly complicated thing. But I found that really interesting—the idea that you had a physical problem, which is the volume of the peach crop, but the interaction between that and how the workers are paid, and what the workers' incentives are, is the kind of thing always fascinated me.

ASPATURIAN: Things that you wouldn't necessarily think are related to each other but turn out to be.

GRETHER: Yes. And that's in essence a lot of social scientific problems. So I got into that kind of thing.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, I can see why.

Graduate studies at Stanford with econometrician M. Nerlove

GREETHER: I was interested in that. Then after I graduated, I was briefly in the army and then on to Stanford for graduate school. It was Kuznets who recommended Stanford as the place to go.

ASPATURIAN: Any particular reason?

GREETHER: They had a better statistics department, he felt, than Harvard. Dale Jorgenson, who I took the Berkeley graduate class from, was saying Harvard was the best place—that's where his PhD was from. So I talked to some faculty members—one guy who was coming through Berkeley from Harvard, and Kenneth Arrow, who was visiting from Stanford and was a very well-known economist. I also talked to another man from Harvard named Robert Dorfman, who was also quite a well-known economist. The way he described Harvard was that you went to class and the great man—and it was almost surely a man—would come in and tell you what thoughts were going through the great brain, and you would sit there and absorb this and then go out and do wonderful things. It didn't appeal to me, somehow. It sounded to me like I would probably prefer Stanford.

I also figured I should probably have more economics, and Stanford seemed to be more conducive to having you take classes and learn stuff. So I went to Stanford. And Dale Jorgen-

son, said, “Well, if you’re going to go to Stanford, the hotshot econometrician you should go talk to and work with there is Marc Nerlove. Go see him.”

And so I got there in the fall and introduced myself to Professor Nerlove. I told him who I was and what I’d done and why I was there, and he said, “Well, if you want to work with me, go away and take the following classes.” He gave me a list of classes on stochastic processes and real analysis. “Do these and come back.” And so I did basically. There was a required course in the first-year curriculum that he taught, and so in the third quarter of that year I took that class from him. I did well in it and said, “Okay, you told me to go do these things, and I’ve done them now,” so I worked with him.

ASPATURIAN: What was his field, exactly?

GREETHER: It was a combination of things. At the time he was really interested in time-series Fourier analysis of one thing or another, which I discovered was the hot thing then. It also had been a hot thing in the 1920s, but computational advances in the ’60s, and also data availability, made doing things with it more feasible. So that’s initially what I started studying ’cause that’s what was there.

ASPATURIAN: What did you do your dissertation on?

GREETHER: It was a time series: four somewhat related essays. One was on seasonal adjustment. You know how if you see a

series—let's say unemployment—it's seasonally adjusted. It always goes up in June because people graduate, and so they make various adjustments for that sort of thing. One of Marc Nerlove's articles, using applications of spectral analysis, had been on seasonal adjustment. I thought somewhat later—after I'd been around Stanford for a couple of years—that there was conceptually a problem with the article. So that was one of the chapters of my thesis, explaining that. It took Nerlove a while to come along to decide that it was true.

ASPATURIAN: I was going to ask how he'd reacted.

GREETHER: Well, initially he sort of brushed it off, but I went back and explained why I thought there was a problem, and then he said, "Oh, I see that." I wrote on that, and then I also had some other things. They all involved applications of time series, statistical methods.

ASPATURIAN: Were there any other faculty members at Stanford who were particularly influential for you or who stand out in your mind?

Intellectual influences of D. Jorgenson & G.S.
Maddala

GREETHER: G. S. [Gangadharrao Soundalyarao] Maddala. He got his PhD at the University of Chicago, and he was an assistant professor at Stanford. I worked with him a lot, and over the years, he and I kept in contact.

ASPATURIAN: He stayed at Stanford?

GRETHER: No, he left there and then he went to the University of Rochester. And then when I was at Yale, he came by, and I had contact with him. Then he went to Florida, and then Ohio State. He was a visitor here a couple times also—maybe he spent a year here. We did a fair amount of work together. And in some sense—I said that with Jorgenson I learned how to read certain kinds of articles; Maddala had a similar influence. One thing you learned from G. S. was how to read different kinds of things. Sounds foolish, *how to read*, but—

ASPATURIAN: No, it doesn't.

GRETHER: He could take a theory piece in economics and, say, “Okay, what’s the point here? What’s going on, what’s new? What’s he saying?” Again, it wasn’t what the author said he was saying, necessarily—“yeah, that’s what he says, but let’s actually take a closer look,” you know. He and Jorgenson developed in me that kind of critical thinking in a certain way, which is very valuable. Two people at different stages, who essentially taught me the same thing but slightly differently.

Joins Yale economics faculty as assistant professor,
1966

ASPATURIAN: After you finished your dissertation, did you start applying for jobs immediately?

GREETHER: Actually, you can even do it beforehand. You're not working in a laboratory. My time to go into the job market was, I guess, 1965. Nerlove had left Stanford, and gone to Yale, so I ended up there.

ASPATURIAN: As an assistant professor at Yale, or were you there as a postdoc?

GREETHER: It was as assistant professor but since I hadn't finished my degree yet, I was a lecturer. Kind of like here, where if you come in as an assistant professor but haven't finished your degree, the title is instructor. Same thing. You got paid \$500 a year less, which actually was a good deal because there was all kinds of committee work that you didn't have to do.

ASPATURIAN: Was this your first experience of any length on the East Coast?

GREETHER: No, actually I was born in Philadelphia, but we left there when I was six months, and when I was in fifth grade, we lived for a year in Washington D.C., but other than that, as an adult, I had not been to the East Coast.

ASPATURIAN: What did you think of Yale after Berkeley and Stanford?

Compares Yale's academic environment to Stanford's;
Susan Grether's research work with geneticist J.
Lederberg

GREETHER: I liked Yale a lot. New Haven is not a particularly attractive place to be. Yale people are very interesting, and in that sense it was a very stimulating environment. Stanford was a very different environment. And the reason I know that really had nothing to do with my career at all in some sense. At Stanford, my wife, Susan, had gotten a job in the medical school—in the genetics department. And she worked for a man named Joshua Lederberg—

ASPATURIAN: Oh, yes, I know that name.

GREETHER: He's a Nobel Prize winner. Another Nobel Prize winner by the name of Arthur Kornberg was the head of the biochemistry department, and Josh was the head of the genetics department. Susan was nominally his technician or assistant, but Josh didn't do lab work anymore, so she really worked with other people. I now know, looking back, that for an academic environment, it was quite extraordinary because you had faculty, graduate students, postdocs, and technicians who all socialized together. That's very unusual. Certainly it wasn't true in the Stanford economics department. There was quite a bifurcation.

ASPATURIAN: A real hierarchy there.

GRETHER: Hierarchy. And it was not true at Yale in the same sense either. Not in the economics department. So at Stanford we knew lots of people at the professorial and the graduate student level. Some of these people we still have contact with from that time. It was an interesting and quite a distinguished group.

ASPATURIAN: What was Lederberg like? Do you recall him at all?

GRETHER: He was a very interesting man.

ASPATURIAN: So I hear.

GRETHER: Susan probably had more contact with his wife, who was also in the lab. For example, he would have the graduate students to a big Midwestern corn feed, where they would get fresh-picked corn in his house. He was certainly not as approachable as some of the younger people, but he was very personable. I think he was doing lots of computer analysis of populations, and there was a young guy there named Walter Bodmer—now Sir Walter—who was a population geneticist. All these people mixed together, and it was really quite interesting. I liked the people there—they were extremely good and very interactive and all that.

Approached by B. Klein to join Caltech's social science faculty; "intrigued" by program's interdisciplinary aspirations

ASPATURIAN: How did you happen to come to Caltech? That was a few years later?

Grether: What happened was I got approached in 1969 or 1970 by Burton Klein, who was recruiting people for Caltech, and he interviewed I don't know how many people at Yale. He interviewed at least one other person because the man who shared an office with me was also interviewed, and he probably interviewed some graduate students. So he approached me, and we talked.

At that time, there was some talk about expanding social science at Caltech. You never know what's going to happen with these things—if it's going to work or not. Most things don't. But he described what was going on or might be going on. And I guess I felt like I'd been at Yale for five years; and you don't get paid much, but you have a very good peer group of people your age and there are all these great stars there. I figured that if after five years I haven't got anything out of the great stars, I'm not going to get anything more by hanging out longer. Nerlove was gone much of the time, and I wasn't really worried about that. The prospect at Caltech was that at least they're going to put together a group that involved political scientists and historians and economists. And that setup in-

trigued me because they would have different kinds of data and different kinds of problems. The idea of working with people on their versions of the peach problem, or whatever it was, appealed to me.

I didn't necessarily believe that the program would happen or work, but it sounded, at least from talking to Klein, as though it wouldn't mean going into a place where there was already a big program you were trying to upgrade, which tends to involve lots of infighting. From where I was sitting at Yale, it looked to me like this would be a place you would go and if things worked out, fine, and if they didn't and you didn't like it, you wouldn't have any reason why you couldn't leave because you wouldn't be spending all your time fighting or designing curriculums or that kind of thing. So we decided to go, and, like I say, New Haven was not a particularly—I mean, it's okay, if you like it. We'd seen much of the East Coast by that time, so we were pretty happy to return to the West.

So we get to Yale in '66, and we are physically here in the fall of '71. The previous year, I'd actually been on the Caltech faculty, but on leave, finishing up some work at Yale. Caltech didn't pay me anything. I had grants and Yale—I'd already declared that I was leaving, but they said they would support part of my salary.

Arrival in Pasadena, 1971

ASPATURIAN: Were you familiar with Pasadena?

GRETHER: No. [Laughter] Not at all. When you grow up in the Bay Area, you get lots of information about Southern California, all of which is negative. There's a columnist, Herb Caen, who used to write from that point of view in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

ASPATURIAN: The name is familiar, yes.

GRETHER: Anyhow, I remember when we arrived. They'd shipped our goods out, and we flew to Montana first. My parents had some cabins they'd bought out there, and we sort of vacationed there while the goods were going across the country. The plan was that we'd then come down here and hopefully get here about the same time as they did. Susan and I had both children with us—both John and Megan were born by then. Megan had been born just before we went to Yale, and John just before we left there, so he was like a year old. We also had with us a dog. The travel agent in New Haven who booked the trip didn't realize that the airline she'd booked us on—Pacific Southwest Airlines, which no longer exists—didn't take animals. And we discovered this late in the game. So we couldn't fly to Burbank or wherever we were planning to fly to; instead we flew to Ontario on something called Air California, which I don't think exists anymore either.

But they flew us there with the dog, which was fine, and we rented a car. The 210 Freeway wasn't built yet; they were working on it, I guess. So we had to come up the 10 Freeway and then California 19, which is Rosemead Boulevard. It was a

hot, smoggy day in August, and as we drove along, we saw all these South Sea Island-themed apartment buildings and I thought, “Oh, my God”—

ASPATURIAN: [Laughter] “What have I done?”

GREETHER: [Laughter] *Just what they said*, you know. But anyway, we got here and found it wasn’t like that at all. It was quite nice.

ASPATURIAN: And one day the smog cleared, and you could see the mountains

GREETHER: Yes. But I do remember that drive and thinking, “Oh, my goodness.”

First meeting with various Caltech faculty, including humanities & social sciences (HSS) division chair H. Smith

ASPATURIAN: I have a note from Jenijoy La Belle’s [professor of English, emeritus, d. 2025] [oral history](#) in which she says that she once asked you if you’d had to present papers or references when they were considering hiring you and that you said, “Well, Hallett Smith [HSS division chair, professor of English, emeritus; d. 1996] asked me if I knew his son-in-law, and when I said yes, that seemed to be good enough.” Does that ring a bell?

GREETHER: Well, needless to say, there’s a certain amount of exaggeration in those kinds of stories.

ASPATURIAN: But that's what makes them memorable.

GRETHER: I think, what is true is that normally you gave a talk, and I didn't. For example, when the guy that I shared a Yale office with came out to interview, he was scheduled to give a talk. It's possible that Burton Klein, who recruited me, had forgotten that I was coming. It's just barely possible—Burt did not have an entirely tidy mind. So I arrived, and I was told about the people here. One was Lance Davis [Harkness Professor of Social Science, Emeritus; d. 2014]—I never did meet him; he was at a bridge tournament that day and couldn't be bothered or whatever. I guess I talked to Al [Alan R.] Sweezy [professor of economics, emeritus; d. 1994] and David Elliot [professor of history, emeritus; d. 2007], who was the division executive officer. I had a long conversation with Joel Franklin [professor of applied mathematics, emeritus; d. 2017] and Paco Lagerstrom [professor of applied mathematics, emeritus; d. 1989], who of course—

ASPATURIAN: They were in the sciences.

GRETHER: Well, they were in mathematics, applied math. So there was no talk scheduled. I had dinner at Burt's house; I think his wife was quite surprised to see me. I think that he just forgot. I met these people, and it was a very peculiar thing. It is true I met Hallett Smith. And his daughter—I don't know how many children he had—was married to an economist named David Gordon. His father, Aaron Gordon, was a professor at Cal, and his wife, Margaret, was also an economist, and she

worked for something called the Institute for Industrial Relations as part of the UC system. She was not a professor, but I gather she was quite a good economist. They had two boys—Bobby—Robert J. Gordon—who’s about my age, and is still a professor at Northwestern, and David, who was a Marxist, and spent his career at the New School in New York. David was the one married to Hallett Smith’s daughter. He did ask me about that, and I did say, yes, because, in fact, the Gordons lived about two blocks away from us in Berkeley.

Initial impressions of HSS division & social science faculty

ASPATURIAN: How did the division strike you, having come from these relative powerhouses at Stanford and Yale?

GRETHER: It’s a little hard to be very precise about that. I had second thoughts, to be fair, and I sort of explored the possibility of not—I was told I didn’t have to go; I could have stayed at Yale. Not forever, necessarily, but—

ASPATURIAN: For the time being?

GRETHER: For the time being. I did useful things for them, and they were short-handed on staff, so they were pretty happy to have me stay and teach class. Also, the man I shared an office with at Yale—he came out to Caltech and had an interview. It was a disaster, so he left in high dudgeon. [See Session [Two](#)] That bothered me, to say the least, and that’s why I started exploring

options. Then during the year, while I was back at Yale, [Robert A.] Huttenback, who I hadn't met, becomes the division chair.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, you were not here for that turnover?

GREETHER: I was interviewed and hired while Hallett Smith was the division chair. The year I was on leave is when Huttenback takes over.

ASPATURIAN: I see.

GREETHER: All I know is a name—I get a letter from somebody saying that this has happened. Huttenback invited the people who were going to be new that following year to come out to discuss the future of this new social science program. So that meant that Lance Davis was there. Roger Noll, who had been on leave when I interviewed—he'd been at Brookings [the Brookings Institution], I think—was there. Plott.

ASPATURIAN: Charles Plott [Harkness Professor of Economics and Political Science].

GREETHER: Whom I'd met, but not here. I think probably Jim [James P.] Quirk too, but I don't recall. So they were there, and I came out and had a meeting with other people around the faculty, like Lance Davis and Fred Thompson—I forget who all. About where we were going and all this kind of thing. John Ferejohn wasn't there yet.

ASPATURIAN: He was at Rochester, at that time?

GREETHER: No, I think he was at Illinois as a postdoc or something like that. [Morris P.] Fiorina's PhD was from Rochester. John may have been Stanford at the time; I've forgotten. Anyway, John was on the horizon, but I don't think he was physically here. We had sort of a meeting, getting together to talk about where it was all going, so I don't know—you're asking what my impression was?

ASPATURIAN: Yes.

GREETHER: It seemed pretty chaotic. That's always the case. It was a dinner meeting, which was probably not a good idea. But, you know.

ASPATURIAN: What did you think of the intellectual caliber of your colleagues, given your background?

GREETHER: I was impressed. They seemed fine. That was certainly not a problem.

ASPATURIAN: Did you have any interaction with some of the humanists? Some of the old guard, particularly?

GREETHER: You mean on that visit? That was a one-day visit.

ASPATURIAN: No, no, after you got here.

GREETHER: Some. Let's see, David Elliot was very cordial. We went to some social gatherings at their house. I got along fine, I

think, with Horace Gilbert [professor of business economics, emeritus; d. 1990]. We had some people we knew in common.

Who else did I see a lot of? At this stage of your life, you know, you're doing your thing. You're not really worrying about—

ASPATURIAN: That's true.

GRETHER: So, I was aware of a lot of the controversies that took place, but I wasn't particularly involved in them.

Tensions within HSS under new chair R. Huttenback

ASPATURIAN: I don't know whether this would necessarily count as a controversy, but you must have been privy to some of the politicking that went on with the gradual shift in emphasis from the humanists to the social scientists once Huttenback became chair.

GRETHER: Not really, initially. I just heard that we were going to have this new program, and I'm sure that I didn't think of it as a substitution. It was like something new was going to be added—at least as I initially thought about it. It didn't occur to me initially that there was a problem—that became apparent later on. But even then, it wasn't something that occupied a whole lot of my attention in those days. You perceived that there was bad blood between Huttenback and the English faculty.

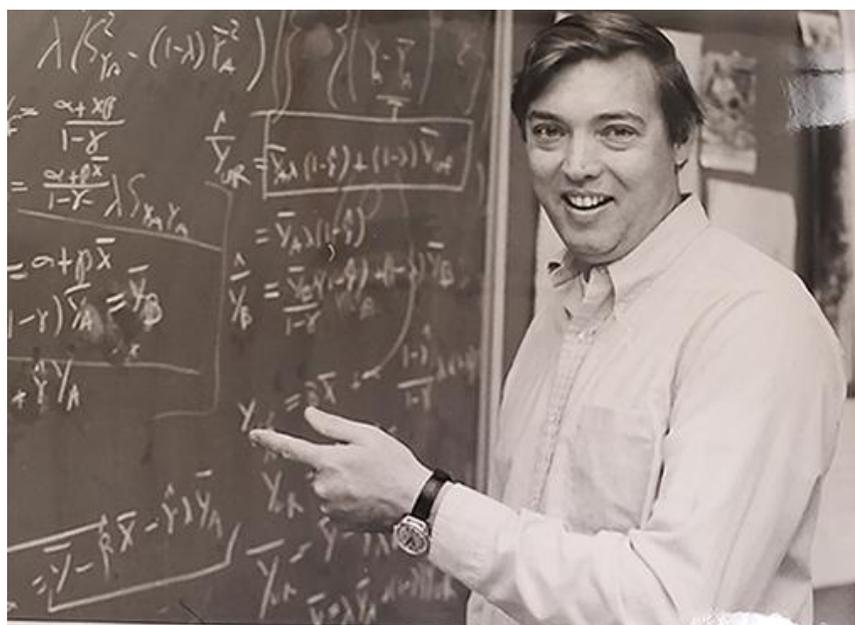
ASPATURIAN: That's what I understand. Yes.

GREETHER: I don't have any idea, because I wasn't here, what dynamics were involved in replacing Hallett Smith. He'd been chair, I gathered, for 25 years or something like that—a long time. I'm basically a young assistant professor, and I meet some old guy who's the head of your department—you expect that. And then somebody else comes in. It was completely transparent, as far as I knew. It was only later on that I discovered that there was this controversy about standards or whatever you want to call it. We did have some long, big divisional faculty meeting about Princeton standards versus Amherst standards or something like that. I remember attending it.

ASPATURIAN: It wasn't something you were terribly invested in at the time.

GREETHER: No. I'm sure I voted for Princeton over Amherst, but mainly I was trying to do whatever I was doing.

Early undergraduate teaching experiences; compares HSS academic environment to Yale's graduate program



Grether in the classroom, 1975. *Caltech Photo*

ASPATURIAN: Did you feel the lack of graduate students? That must have been new to you.

GREETHER: No, not really. I mean, first of all, they began having graduate students in—about maybe '74, was it?

ASPATURIAN: I think that's right, but still it wasn't anything like these full-fledged programs you'd had at your previous institutions.

GREETHER: No, but, at Yale, one of the things I taught was an introductory course in statistics for the first-year students. The year before I got there, Marc Nerlove had arrived and had substantially upgraded it. And that course was sort of de facto required in the sense that students had to do it sometime in their first or second year to pass a certain set of exams that included this material. So when I got there, I got the usual first-year students—of which there are quite a few since it's a pretty big graduate program—plus the people who had decided they didn't want to do it the year before because it looked like it was going to be too hard. So I had a large and quite heterogeneous class, and as often happens with graduate students when you go out to teach, your instinct almost always is—or my instinct was, at least—that if I understand the material, it must be trivial. Therefore you probably escalate in order to make sure it isn't trivial and that you don't bore these people who must know at least as much as you do. The net effect of that is that eventually you figure out you've got to make bit of a course correction.

It's also the case that it's a very large graduate program at Yale, quite heterogeneous, and the median student was not very quantitative, so the mere existence of graduate students was not a plus.

ASPATURIAN: I see.

GREETHER: The fact is, there were some very good students that I have kept up with over the years, and they were pleasures to

deal with. Some of them you've even heard of. Like Janet Yellen, for example [chair of the US Federal Reserve, 2014–18; US Secretary of the Treasury since 2021].

ASPATURIAN: Yes.

GREETHER: But there were also a lot of others. I always taught all the first-year students. By the time you got the second-year students, that was different because now they were selecting into the coursework; it was only the first year course that was required. That was a different story. But it was a tremendous amount of work to teach those first-year students, probably because they were a very heterogeneous group.

ASPATURIAN: You didn't necessarily perceive a plethora of graduate students as a virtue?

GREETHER: No.

Exposure to work by Twersky & Kahneman sparks interest in psychology & behavioral economics

ASPATURIAN: What was your research in your first decade here? You had finished your PhD.

GREETHER: Oh, yeah, I finished that at Yale. I would have been sacrificed on an altar if I hadn't: You had to do that. When I got here, I was working on some time-series things and also finishing up the project I had been working on in New Haven with

another Yale faculty member. It had to do with looking at the determinants of residential property prices in the New Haven area. We had lots of data we'd gathered. It was a non-time series thing, and I was becoming interested in other types of things, and so I was finishing up that. I also had some time-series work I was doing, some of it with Maddala. This decade goes from '71 to '81, so it's a fairly long period, and while I was doing this time-series work, I was going to conferences and doing all the things that you do as a researcher. The Minneapolis Fed [Federal Reserve] used to have an annual conference, and the department of economics at the University of Minnesota was very good, and they had several people who worked on time-series problems who are very, very distinguished now; they were young then, of course.

I used to go to their annual meetings, and so one year—it must have been early '70s, I guess, so I hadn't been here that long—I was invited to come back to this conference to discuss a paper by Tom [Thomas J.] Sargent. Tom Sargent, who visited here recently as a Gordon Moore scholar or whatever, was then a very young guy, as we all were. He had quite a good, highly technical paper on rational expectations motives—formation of rational expectations.

ASPATURIAN: Economic expectations?

GRETHER: Yes. Beliefs about the future. A number of assumptions were built into it. He had a clever estimation procedure—I've forgotten the details now. At the time I was getting a little

tired of the time-series work and becoming more interested in other things, and one of them was wondering about whether researchers know how expectations are actually formed. So, using this as an excuse, I started reading psychology, just on my own, looking for things about expectations and about how people would work with or process information that was uncertain—that was probabilistic in some fashion. That was when I ran across early papers by [Daniel] Kahneman and [Amos] Tversky. You know Kahneman, who won a Nobel Prize in economics in 2002. He and Amos Tversky were writing lots of things. Paul Slovic and [Sarah] Lichtenstein had done a number of things. Lots of these people were at Michigan, but one, Ward Edwards, ended up at USC, and I got to know him. Anyway, I spent all the time I should have spent studying Tom Sargent's paper reading psychology.

ASPATURIAN: Was this your first exposure basically to psychology?

GRETHER: Yes. That's all I knew—from what I was reading. I read everything. I would go to the library, and I would just scour the journals, and I would get citations and try to figure out what was going on, what was known. When I got to that conference, my presentation basically summarized what I had gotten out of the psychology literature, and Tom said to me, "You didn't discuss my paper," which was correct. One of the attendees at the conference, a guy named Stephen Salop, who'd been a student at Yale, afterward said, "The general consensus

was you won that conference.” But I was never invited back. That was my introduction to the field. It’s how I got into that through this interest in something else.

Publishes survey paper challenging “rational actor” assumptions in economics

ASPATURIAN: Did that lead to a paper on your part?

GREETHER: Yes. I wrote a survey paper.

ASPATURIAN: Do you have a title? Off the top of your head?

GREETHER: “Recent” something or other. “Recent Studies” —

ASPATURIAN: I’ll look it up.

GREETHER: It was eventually published in the *Papers and Proceedings of the American Economic Review*, probably mid-’70s, I don’t recall.

ASPATURIAN: I’ll find it. [[“Recent Psychological Studies of Behavior under Uncertainty,” *American Economic Review*](#), American Economic Association, May 1978]

GREETHER: Anyhow, what happened is that a man named Jacob Marschak at UCLA picked up on it, and he asked me to form a session at the American Economic Association meetings based on that work.

ASPATURIAN: What was the burden of that paper? Since it obviously attracted a lot of attention, what were you saying?

GREETHER: Well, the things that the psychologists were saying were in some sense quite at odds with what economists thought.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, I see—you were pointing up some of these contradictions.

GREETHER: It's also the case that I was getting persuaded by the psychologists that if you want to really study these things, you have to be very careful how you do it. So I proceeded then to do some work where the object was to test some of the theories and ideas that the psychologists had. Economists had never paid attention to this in a way that economists should pay attention to it. And so the first paper I wrote on that—which wasn't published until 1980, although I wrote it several years earlier—was an attempt to do exactly that: To take a theory or semi-theory, or whatever you want to call it, that psychologists were putting forth and try to see whether it actually described what people do.

ASPATURIAN: So you were challenging some conventional thinking in the field, it sounds like.

GREETHER: To some extent. I wanted to know if you did this in a way that an economist might pay attention to, whether you would get the same result.

HSS environment conducive to unconventional ideas in economics

ASPATURIAN: I'm wondering if you think, looking back, that it was easier to do this from a place like Caltech, where you didn't have the weight of an old guard impinging on—

GREETHER: Oh, I'm sure that's true. It's also the case that before I got into this in the early '70s, I got together with John Ferejohn, and we probably wrote half a dozen papers together in a field called social choice theory which is very different from the research that I had been doing, and that was almost surely the kind of thing that never would have occurred at another institution. The people here were very receptive to those kinds of interactions.

ASPATURIAN: Social choice, if you could sum it up quickly, meaning?

GREETHER: Think of majority rule as an example of a choice mechanism.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, okay. So you didn't encounter any pushback here?

GREETHER: Oh, no, no, no. To the contrary; they were very receptive to that kind of thing. So then, the first paper that I wrote related to psychology was sent to *Econometrica* and rejec-

ted on the grounds that it was against their editorial policy to publish things like that.

ASPATURIAN: Like what?

GREETHER: Like experiments, that type of thing. Editorial policy: “This is not acceptable,” basically. I did get it published, but it took a while. There was a lot of that when we started doing this research. Another paper I worked on I’d done a fair amount of talking to Plott about it, and we designed a related experiment and later published a joint paper on that. So, you know.

Emergence of experimental economics at Caltech

ASPATURIAN: Had experimental economics by that time become a thing at Caltech, or was this a sort of pilot activity that the two of you were engaged in?

GREETHER: For that, we have to go back in the early ’70s when Vernon Smith was here as a Fairchild Scholar. He’s a Caltech alum, actually.

ASPATURIAN: He won the Nobel Prize [for economics, in 2002].

GREETHER: He and Plott worked together a lot; and it was at that time that Charlie decided that, well, this [i.e., experimental economics] was what he was going to do. I knew Vernon from Stanford, oddly enough. When I was a first-year student, Vernon was visiting there. He taught the third semester of the

microeconomics course that all students took and which I was in at the time. We did an experiment in the class. I was interested in that, and I knew Vernon from that experience. He probably didn't remember me, but when I came here, I followed up with him. In some sense, the idea of doing this kind of thing was not foreign to me. And there was no pushback here at all; it was the other way around. In fact, I got financial support for the early experiments from the division. They had gotten some money for appraising earthquake predictions, which are inherently probabilistic.

ASPATURIAN: HSS had gotten this money.

GRETHER: Well, somebody had. And so that was used to finance my experiments on expectation formation. How people evaluate probabilistic information, that sort of thing.

Collegial & “stimulating intellectual environment” in social science program

ASPATURIAN: What were your relationships like with your colleagues in the division, once you had been settled in and had been working here for a while?

GRETHER: It was really good. First of all, we were all young. Also it was a very unusual group in the sense that in addition to economists, you had political scientists and some quantitative historians, and we were all sort of thrown in together and interacted together a lot. For me it was very stimulating—a very

good intellectual environment. We could teach courses together, and nobody cared because you didn't have to worry about whether or not this counts as an economics course or something else. I remember that Morgan Kousser [Kenan, Jr., Professor of History and Social Science, Emeritus] and I taught at least one class together.

ASPATURIAN: Was that in the '70s?

GREETHER: Before the 1980s. We were all sort of getting to know each other. Like I say, John Ferejohn and I wrote papers together. There was a lot of interaction. It was a very stimulating environment, very open.

ASPATURIAN: Did you have much to do with the humanities side during these first years?

GREETHER: I knew the people. I knew some of them.

ASPATURIAN: And I guess Morgan Kousser was between the two areas, as a quantitative historian. Dan [Daniel J.] Kevles [Koepfli Professor of the Humanities, Emeritus]?

GREETHER: I'm trying to remember; this is not the kind of thing I really thought about. I knew Kevles, and who else, let's see. It's also an age thing. You knew the people who were roughly your age.

ASPATURIAN: Sure, that's who you socialized with and worked with, of course.

GREETHER: I don't think I had extensive dealings with senior people. There was a guy named David Mayhew, who was supposed to be quite good, and he had a serious heart attack. I knew some of the younger people.

Huttenback departs; R. Noll becomes HSS chairman

ASPATURIAN: What do you remember about the transition period between Huttenback, after he was recruited away by Santa Barbara, and Roger Noll, who took over the division? Were you aware of the fracas over the Jenijoy La Belle tenure case and the fallout from that?

GREETHER: That was earlier. When I said I wasn't involved—I wasn't totally unconscious. Jenijoy's tenure case—I knew about it. It'd be hard not to.

ASPATURIAN: That's right; I guess it became university-wide after a while.

GREETHER: Also you would get a notice in your mailbox saying a very important letter has arrived. You'd say, "Jesus, what's all this about?" I knew her, but not well. And I knew Ende, but not well.

ASPATURIAN: Stuart Ende, the literature prof.

GREETHER: Yes. I think in terms of social relations, Ferejohn was probably in some sense the entrée to the humanists. I think he

and the humanists were closer, and I knew some of them in some sense through him. I'm not sure where we're going.

Social scientists embark on graduate program, 1974

ASPATURIAN: During your first decade here, the division underwent this transition to a greater emphasis on the social sciences that kind of culminated with Huttenback's departure and Roger Noll taking over. I wondered from your standpoint if you saw anything particular come out of that.

GREETHER: Unless I misunderstand where you're going here, the social science program starts, I think, around '74.

ASPATURIAN: I think that's right.

GREETHER: And we instituted a graduate program. It takes a while to get the kinks ironed out. We did that, and we had graduate students who were incredibly good.

ASPATURIAN: That's what I hear.

GREETHER: Usually the Achilles' heel of any new graduate program is going to be the quality of the students. We were extremely lucky in that we had a number of very good students who came here, maybe because of the Caltech name. There were some who had been Caltech undergraduates, but mostly they came from elsewhere. And they did well in the sense that they got good jobs when they left. Plus I think the Fairchild

[visiting scholars] program really helped put us on the map in the sense that we could get people like Vernon Smith or Bill [William] Riker, for example, who visited as part of that program, and they gave us a lot of visibility. That and our early graduates who went out and were successful. It's also the case that people like John Ferejohn and Morris Fiorina came here basically as new PhDs—and this was not a classic political science department by any matter or means—and while here, they achieved prominence. I think that in itself speaks to a lot about the environment and made it a more attractive place for both students and other faculty members to consider. So I don't think, or at least I never thought of it like this, that this represented a change in emphasis in the sense that, as you phrase it, sort of implies a taking away. I didn't see it.

ASPATURIAN: I was thinking more that the social sciences acquired a PhD program and graduate students and became more conventionally what you would find at a university—

GREETHER: Yes—

ASPATURIAN: —Whereas the humanities did not.

GREETHER: No, and in some sense it's not clear how they could have.

ASPATURIAN: “Emphasis” might not be the right word, but I think you know what I mean.

Contrasts Caltech's "focused" social science program to more diffuse humanities agenda

GRETHER: Yes. That has been a long-term problem, but—how should I put it—I think what made the social science group work was that it had a focus. We had our internal disagreements—any group of human beings is going to have disagreements, particularly when you get a very intellectually active group. But basically we had a focus: You had a program that took parts of economics and parts of political science and combined them. It was not a small economics department next to a small political science department; it was, hopefully, a coherent group. And that meant that who you brought into it and who would work well with it was defined in terms of this program.

ASPATURIAN: I see. You had a framework, an intellectual framework.

GRETHER: You had a framework. And that also meant that there were things that wouldn't fit. We were a very small group—about a dozen people maybe—and even at its max, it wasn't twice that. Compared to, say, the Yale economics department, which is probably 55 faculty, and a political science department that is probably comparable in size, this was a very small group, and it's a coherent group, so you couldn't keep branching out into completely new directions all the time. You had to have

something coherent so you could focus on it—sort of a critical mass.

ASPATURIAN: You had to leverage the strength of your individual people and their collaborations.

GRETHER: Right. Yes. That was very important, and that was very different from what you have on the humanities side of the division.

ASPATURIAN: I see. I see.

GRETHER: Because on the social sciences side, you'd say, "This person fits right here, relates to this kind of person and that kind of person, and will bring something in," and all that kind of thing. Of course, I didn't know about this at the time, but then later on, when I would see these discussions on the humanities side, it was, "We have no one who does that part of the world in that century." It was sort of the opposite of a focus. That's what seemed to me was missing there. In fact, much of what went on in the social science side and on the humanities side while I was division chair was predicated on that belief—that what made the social science program important was that it was focused on something. We would disagree on how much of this and how much of that—there's always that kind of thing. But basically you had a coherent program that was working.

“A program that couldn’t easily be duplicated”

Not only that, it was a program that couldn’t easily be duplicated. That was because the academic, the departmental, structure of most institutions cuts against it.

ASPATURIAN: So you had a unique flavor here.

GRETHER: We weren’t the only one. Carnegie Mellon, the business school, had it.

ASPATURIAN: Interesting. Another science institution.

GRETHER: Yes. Rochester had some collaboration between people in economics and political science, but they didn’t have a program like this. And other universities, even when they saw us, had trouble putting together a program like this because of the institutional problems. We didn’t have to worry about who pays for what—does funding for this course come out of political science or economics or whatever, because it was a social science *group*. At the same time, there were limits on how much you wanted to add to it. There’s always that understanding that it was only going to be so large. At Caltech you’re not going to have these huge kinds of departments you get elsewhere.

ASPATURIAN: No, you always have to make these choices.

GRETHER: So you had this focus and this group. To go back to what you were saying, I never really thought of it in terms of adding this versus something else—in terms of a shift in the

sense of social science versus the humanities. It was just that we had this thing, and it was working, and we did it.

ASPATURIAN: I think that's a good way to end this session. Unless you want to add something else?

GREETHER: No, I had no intention of saying all this.

ASPATURIAN: It's interesting. Why shouldn't you say it?

SESSION 2, DECEMBER 20, 2017

“One of the problems of hiring people like you is that I can't fire you”

ASPATURIAN: You mentioned that you wanted to revisit a couple aspects of our last interview, so let's start with that.

GREETHER: Well, one was revisit and one was something I just forgot about. I think I mentioned that one of the problems I had in terms of deciding to come out here was that the guy I shared an office with at Yale came out for an interview that did not go well.

ASPATURIAN: That's what you said, yes.

GREETHER: His name is Donald Brown, and we shared an office for a couple of years. He had his PhD in mathematics. Appar-

ently he had some interest in economics. I think, but I'm not positive, that Tjalling Koopmans was the one who in some sense discovered him, if you like, and brought him to Yale to see if he would sort of take to economics. He did, and he became a very distinguished, successful, and prolific economic theorist: he ended up as a professor at Yale and was department chairman for a while. He spent some time at Stanford. And when Burt Klein came through Yale, one of the people he talked to was Don Brown, who was not in a tenure-track position at the time; it was sort of a "see if this works" kind of a thing. Later on, of course, he became an assistant professor at Yale and so on. Burt said that if he came to Caltech, possibly he could come as an associate professor with tenure. And that intrigued him.

So when he came out, it was partly with that expectation in mind, and when he gets here, he's told, "No, that's not in the cards," but they had something that was just as good. And it was a research position in what was EQL [Environmental Quality Laboratory]—a position I don't think you've ever heard of; I never heard of it either. And so in addition to whoever was around, he met Lester Lees [professor of aeronautics and environmental engineering; d. 1986] and various people that Lees worked with at EQL. They talked about their ambitions for EQL. The position for him would not have been a professorial position; it would have been a research ladder position. As part of this interview process, he was scheduled to meet with the provost, and so he met with Bob [Robert F.] Christy [Institute

Professor of Physics, Emeritus; Caltech provost 1970–1980; d. 2012], who apparently said, “One of the problems of hiring people like you is that we can’t fire you.” Don happens to be Black. And he left. He aborted the interview and came back with that story, which was not a happy thing, as you can imagine.

ASPATURIAN: No. It was not.

GREETHER: And that’s what made me reconsider: Do I really want to do this?

ASPATURIAN: Christy actually said that to him?

GREETHER: Don Brown said he did. After I came here, I talked to Bob Huttenback about it, and he said that he had talked to Christy about it and Christy said, “I just spoke to him as though he were a white man.”

ASPATURIAN: That in itself—

GREETHER: —Whatever that means.

Initial difficulties with Faculty Office; meets Caltech president H. Brown

Something else had completely slipped my mind but was very important for me in getting to know Caltech once I got here and where did I fit in. As I think I told you, when I accepted the position here, I asked for a year’s leave. Caltech wasn’t paying

me or anything during that time—I had other sources. But when we got here the following year, in August of 1971, the fact that we were new apparently was something the faculty office could never deal with, so we were never treated as “new faculty.” There is for example a New Faculty Reception, which everybody new gets invited to, but we were never singled out and invited. All those things that happen to new faculty—when I went over to the Athenaeum, I was told I couldn’t join it unless somebody would recommend me. That part of the machinery didn’t work.

That wasn’t true with the president’s office. I did get a call saying that President [Harold] Brown [Caltech president 1969–1977; d. 2019] would come by and greet me, which he did. The only thing odd about it was that he would be arriving at 11:17 a.m.—it was one of the curses of the digital clock—and he did arrive precisely at that time, and we had a nice discussion. So the arrival thing really baffled the faculty office. It didn’t baffle for some reason the Caltech Women’s Club, and so my wife got a call from, I think, Shirley Gray—

ASPATURIAN: Harry Gray’s [Beckman Professor of Chemistry] wife.

GREYER: And in the course of that, she said, “What interests do you have?” and Susan mentioned that she liked to play chamber music, and so Shirley said, “We’ll get you together with Alice Leighton,” who was, it turns out, the wife of Bob [Robert] Leighton [Valentine Professor of Physics, Emeritus;

d. 1997], who was at that time the division chairman in physics, math, and astronomy.

Carpooling with scientists offers insights into campus culture

Shortly after we arrived, we rented a house sight-unseen on Villa Street, between Altadena Drive and Sierra Madre. In November, we moved into a house we purchased in Altadena, and it turned out we were about two blocks away from where the Leightons lived. And so Alice Leighton mentioned to Susan that there was a neighborhood carpool to campus, which had four people in it and that a fifth person would be welcome, because everybody would drive one day a week. And so during my first year here, I became a member of the neighborhood carpool. It consisted of Robert Leighton, Leverett Davis [professor of theoretical physics; d. 2003]—a quite senior physicist who lived about two or three blocks from us—a third physicist, Ed [Edward C.] Stone [Morrisroe Professor of Physics; d. 2024], and Fred [Frederick] Shair.

So we all lived close together and drove back and forth. It was a great advantage to me because they left every day promptly at 5:30 to come home, except on Thursday, the day when the physics seminars are held. So it meant that if you were in a meeting or something that was running late, you had a good excuse that you couldn't control for leaving. That was a great virtue because faculty meetings tended to run on. But being in this

group, first of all, you got some indication of how these people thought and how they talked about various things. It was very clear to me right from the first that Fred Shair really deferred to Bob Leighton, even though they were not in the same division. In fact, it got to the point that when Fred drove, we all would agree that Bob had to sit in front because Fred had a tendency to turn around and look at Bob when he was talking to him while he was driving, and this bothered us. I did learn a lot because I'd hear about various things that were going on.

ASPATURIAN: In physics particularly?

GRETHER: Well, say, Ed taught one of the terms of the freshman physics course one year, and we'd talk about how that worked and how you got students—because they're all pass-fail—to do this, that, and the other thing. They would talk not so much about about Institute business—although there was one major time of Institute business—but a lot about environmental actions and what they thought were appropriate. You got a sense of the mindset of the people and also about things going on within the Institute as well. Leighton was a very sharp man. I thought probably the smartest guy in the group was Stone. And he was the first to drop out—he had to go to JPL a lot, and at some point he becomes, I think, project scientist for the Voyager mission, and when that happens he's gone nearly every day and it doesn't work for him to be in a ride group, so he dropped out.

Need for literature classes questioned; scientists' views on social science

But one thing I particularly remember: I don't recall exactly when it was and therefore I can't say what, if anything, was going on at the Institute that would have provoked this, but we were driving home one day when Bob Leighton raised the question of why do we have professors of English. He said, "Why do we have people doing this? Most of our wives read books, and if students want to discuss books, there seems to me no reason why we couldn't have faculty wives lead discussion groups with students to discuss the books they're reading." And that told me more than anyone else could have about how at least certain aspects of humanities and social sciences were viewed within the Institute.

ASPATURIAN: This was in your first year here?

GRETHER: Roughly, the first year or two. Because the ride group only lasted so long. In any event, that was something that I wouldn't say I argued about; I'd just say I recorded it. It certainly was very telling that this was the way that they viewed that kind of activity. Nobody ever made a frontal assault on economics, except they tended not to believe in prices. Not just that group—it's just a general thing. They don't believe that raising the price on something will restrict its use or that just rich people will buy it. But in any event, the thing about English really—impressed is the wrong word—

ASPATURIAN: Forcibly struck you, it sounds like.

GREETHER: That was one of the things I wanted to mention because through that carpool, I got to meet a number of other people on the faculty. We would be invited to parties and other things, and that provided a much broader entree into non-HSS parts of the Institute. I learned fairly early on how these people thought and their attitudes towards—

ASPATURIAN: The humanities and social science. Did you find that Leighton's view was widely shared?

GREETHER: Well, I don't know. Not necessarily his view specifically about literature or English. Probably Don [Donald] Cohen [Powell Professor of Applied Mathematics, Emeritus; d. 2020] would have had a similar view about social science.

ASPATURIAN: He's a mathematician.

GREETHER: A mathematician. He would explicitly say—and in fact would sometimes cite Hans Liepmann [Von Kármán Professor of Aeronautics, Emeritus; d. 2009] as having the right attitude—that Caltech should not be doing these other things. It dilutes our—

ASPATURIAN: Prime focus.

GREETHER: Yes. I have no idea how widespread these opinions were; most people were more tactful than that. [Laughter] But it was clearly there. That was something I became aware of.

More on early interactions with campus scientists & their views of humanists

ASPATURIAN: Actually one of the things I was going to start by asking you today was what your early associations with the scientists on campus were.

GRETHER: That was a primary one.

ASPATURIAN: And not in an institutional setting but in a more social one.

GRETHER: There were committees and things, of course, and you would see people there. But these other things were actually very helpful, quite apart from the occasional remarks, in just getting to know people.

ASPATURIAN: Did you share these viewpoints that you were hearing with your colleagues in the HSS division?

GRETHER: Probably not. Certainly I didn't do so as any kind of a campaign. I might well have said to someone, "You won't believe what I heard yesterday," but it would have been more of a conversational thing. I think that the response from the social science side would not have been surprise.

ASPATURIAN: Probably not. One of the things Susan Davis [division administrator for HSS, 1981–2012; d. 2023] said in her [oral history](#) was that at the time she came, which was still the Hallett

Smith era, she had the distinct impression that the scientists viewed the humanists kind of as lively hoarders of culture but not on the same level as the scientists and the engineers themselves. She thought they liked having them around to discuss Shakespeare and to talk about poetry, but did not take them seriously in terms of scholarship.

GRETHER: I don't know. The Leighton thing would be beyond that. That was a whole 'nother step up. According to these guys, we could just talk to our wives at home if we want to hear about this kind of thing. I just don't know about Susan's comment. I've heard that said. But I'm not sure I ever heard it said by the people who were alleged to hold those views.

ASPATURIAN: I understand.

GRETHER: And so I don't know. It's possible, I guess, but I don't recall anything where someone said something to me that would corroborate that. It may have been true.

R. Noll named HSS division chair after national search; Grether becomes executive officer for social sciences

ASPATURIAN: In 1978 you became executive officer for the social sciences. How did that come about? You were working with Roger Noll, I assume.



Grether in 1979, a year after becoming executive officer for the social sciences.
Caltech Photo

GREETHER: Well, he was the division chair. What happens is that Huttenback leaves to go to UC Santa Barbara, and I think Rod [Rodman] Paul [Harkness Professor of History; d. 1987] becomes the acting, temporary division chief for a year, while they had a search for a division chair. And the search was fairly extensive. They brought in lots of outside candidates.

ASPATURIAN: It was a national search?

GRETHER: It was a national search; that's correct. Roger was on the committee, but I was not. And they probably offered it to Bill Riker, who was a political scientist at Rochester. I know they offered it to a man named Allan Bogue, who was a historian at University of Wisconsin. Bogue had obviously turned it down. In fact, since Huttenback, we've had several division chairs, all of whom have been social scientists, but the job has actually been offered to humanists who turned it down. Murph [Marvin L.] Goldberger [Caltech president, 1978–1987; professor of theoretical physics; d. 2014] offered it to a philosopher—a woman named Ruth Marcus—and she turned it down. I don't remember exactly when, but it was sort of a big public thing as I remember reading about it in the newspapers. It was offered to Jim [James] Woodward [Koepfli Professor of the Humanities, Emeritus], I believe, at some point. He was a philosopher of science within the division. And I know that at the time before [Jonathan] Katz [Sugahara Professor of Social Sciences and Statistics] became division chair, in the period when [Peter] Bossaerts and I were sort of sharing the job [see Session [Four](#)], the job had been offered to John Brewer [Broad Professor of History and Literature, Emeritus], who's also a historian, and he turned it down.

In this particular search, it was offered at least twice externally, and people said no. And so they ended up with two candidates, I think: One was Roger, and one was myself. Murph chose Noll,

and Roger then asked me to be the executive officer for the social sciences, which I was, for four years, starting in 1978.

ASPATURIAN: Yes. Those are the dates I have. Did the sorts of viewpoints you encountered in this carpool factor into your thinking once you moved into administration in the division?

How preconceived assumptions can lead to interdisciplinary misunderstandings

GREETHER: It's hard to know. I don't know that it came from the carpool, but one thing I was always very careful about with subjects that were far from my own was never to claim competence to judge the discipline. So I would never, for example, read an English candidate's manuscript for the purpose of deciding whether it was competent work. I wouldn't do that. It was different from saying I wouldn't read anything from these fields—I might read them for my own sake. I typically was very careful about putting myself up as a standard or saying, "I can decide that." That's something you learn in the social science program because you're dealing with people in different disciplines, and all these disciplines have all these unstated assumptions or commonalities within them. So with an economist, there's always a lot of shared information. Mathematicians don't go back and start with the number system every time they talk to each other. They share a lot of knowledge. And the same thing is true of political scientists and psychologists and others. And so you learn to be very careful about that.

If you want an example of something like the carpool, the closest thing I remember is Don Cohen talking about Jim Quirk. Jim Quirk was a theorist who came here in 1971, the same time I did. When he arrived, he was invited to give a talk to the applied math people, and Don Cohen was telling me about it and what a disaster it was. And he said that the reason it was a disaster was that if Jim had simply talked about what he did in some general way, they would have found that interesting. But instead he talked about technical things—about matrices—and Don said, “We know more than he could possibly know about matrices. And yet, here he was, trying to tell us about matrices.” This was an example of how “silly” Jim was, in some sense. I remember having listened to talks occasionally in applied math, and sometimes someone would pose a problem that you’d listen to and say, “That’s not a hard problem; why are they having so much trouble with it?” It was only later you realize that the reason is that in the problems you’re working on, solutions have to have certain properties that maybe everybody in your discipline—

ASPATURIAN: Certain assumptions are built in.

GREYER: Certain assumptions are built in. That’s right. And so you might be able to think of examples, where you think “that’ll work,” but it wouldn’t satisfy those things that you didn’t know. So you really have to be quite careful in judging. For example, I know that Quirk was studying matrices of a qualitative nature that came out of certain kinds of systems,

and so, sure, the applied mathematicians know a lot about things, but they're things that don't necessarily satisfy the constraints that he had. So listening to Don go on and on about this incompetent guy whom I knew actually was very good at what he did, I knew that it wasn't that Jim didn't know; it was that there wasn't this shared knowledge with the mathematicians. It's just like when I hear somebody say something, and I say, "That's easy; how come he's having so much trouble with it?" I have to say, "Well, maybe my solution wouldn't be acceptable."

So you learn, hopefully, when you're in a situation with lots of different disciplines to hold your tongue or at least maybe look before you leap and just query things to try to find out what's behind there. And that attitude had to do, not with what went on in the carpool per se, but with this idea of trying to understand how people from different disciplines see each other and how some of the trouble has to do with the fact that there are these shared and common assumptions that often are unstated, if you like. When people from different disciplines talk to each other not knowing that, each may think that the others are sort of dopes or unseeing or insensitive, without being aware that they are talking past each other because they have different sets of ground rules that they are invoking.

ASPATURIAN: They say, "We know all that," and then they stop listening to the substance of what's being said.

GREETHER: Basically, yeah.

Changes in HSS curriculum & teaching positions under chairman Noll

ASPATURIAN: Interesting. What was your impression of Roger Noll as division chair?

GRETHER: Well, he did a lot of things. One thing that he did had to do with people who were not on the tenure track. There's two particular groups. There's the people who taught music lessons—he eventually moved them out of the division. I think he felt fairly strongly that we should only have things in the division that relate to our teaching and research role, and it's hard to see that playing a clarinet or whatever met that test. It was a perfectly reasonable thing for someone to do, you know, but—

ASPATURIAN: —It was a performing art, not an academic discipline.

GRETHER: Right. There was no such thing as performance and activities classes. One of the last things Roger did was to move those people out of the division and essentially into the central administration. In fact they set up these performance activity courses where you get Institute credit, as opposed to academic credit, for spending your time doing these things, and they weren't taught in the division any more. (One of the first things I had to deal with as division chair was deciding what status these people should have in the division because they give

grades.) So that was one thing he did. He was also very concerned about the language lecturers—

ASPATURIAN: Foreign languages.

GRETHER: Foreign languages. He had people in art history and music history—that kind of thing—who were all lecturers. Huttenback had decreed at some point that in languages, we would not have professorial rank or tenure-track people. They would just be lecturers.

ASPATURIAN: Annette Smith? She became a professor of French eventually.

GRETHER: She became a professor when Roger was division chair. So anyhow, the lecturers were a source, I gather, of some discontent. You know, they weren't treated as well as the rest of the people. I think that Roger somehow wanted to correct that.

To that end what he wanted to do was move teaching foreign languages and art history away from lecturers and on to tenure-track professorial positions. He switched the lecturers who taught languages, for example, to the rank of instructor. That means they got retirement benefits, which lecturers at that time did not get. They also become something called voting faculty, which means they can go and vote on all the degrees. It doesn't put them in any divisional faculty or anything like that. But this was sort of a step on the way to making those appointments professorial. For example, if you're hired as an assistant

professor but haven't finished your degree, you're called an instructor. It's a designation that is used in some sense for positions that are transitory. And now we have postdoctoral instructor positions in the humanities.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, we'll get to that. [See Session [Three](#)]

GREETHER: They have the rank of instructor, and so they can teach, and they also get retirement benefits. So you might view it as a somewhat higher status. So he converted the language lecturers to that. In the case of art history there was a woman, by the name of Aimée Brown Price, who taught it, and then that was declared a professorial position and they had a search, which was won by a woman, Martha Ward. And so Aimée Brown Price lost her job, and you had now a professor rather than a lecturer teaching the art history course. With the language people, that transition had not yet taken place, but it was in the works.

Humanities hires & social science departures alter character of HSS

Roger also brought in two senior people—one fairly early on, by the name of Jerry [Jerome John] McGann.

ASPATURIAN: Literature.

GREETHER: Literature, yes. McGann was quite a big fish.

ASPATURIAN: So I gather. He came from [University of] Virginia?

GREETHER: No, he eventually went to Virginia. He came from Johns Hopkins. I got to know him reasonably well. I don't know exactly what commitments were made to him, but they were probably substantial. He clearly, I thought, viewed himself as the presumptive head of humanities as opposed to just English. So he was brought in. And there was a general building up; Roger also brought in a guy by the name of Ron [Ronald] Bush.

ASPATURIAN: I know that name also. Also literature.

GREETHER: He came in as a tenured associate professor, I think. He might have been a full professor, I don't know.

ASPATURIAN: So Roger Noll brought in these new literary scholars.

GREETHER: He brought in new literary scholars, definitely. There were probably others as well. The other big thing, which was something that Goldberger was very enthusiastic about, was philosophy. And during what pretty much turned out to be Roger's last year, he brought in a man named Brian Barry as a senior philosopher in the humanities side of the division. Barry considered himself as least as much a social scientist as he did a humanist. The social sciences were not consulted about this; he was appointed as a humanist. I know that significant commitments were made to him about positions, five in particular. He

had a letter from Roger, which I only discovered after I became division chair, that committed five positions soon to philosophy.

ASPATURIAN: I see; so he'd have a group.

GRETHER: So he'd have a group. There were also things going on in the social science side of the division; I'd have to go back and look. Two things that were ominous were that both John Ferejohn and Morris Fiorina were not here at the end of Roger's tenure.

ASPATURIAN: They had left.

GRETHER: Well, physically they left but officially they were still on the faculty, on leave. John had got a year's appointment at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. His wife, Sally, who I think had either never gone to college or never finished college, became an undergraduate at Stanford and very much liked that. So he stayed there. It's not to say that he might not have gone to Stanford anyway, but he wasn't expressing discontent with Caltech, although Stanford may have been a better place for him. Fiorina, I think, went to Washington University in St. Louis and then also to Harvard, and I think he was probably the less happy of the two. I think that he may have felt somewhat underappreciated here in the sense that he didn't have as many students. I remember one year—I think it may have been '72—where he gave a course on the election thinking, "Oh, people will be excited," and hardly

anybody showed. Caltech students didn't seem to be aware of or care that there was an election going on. He may also have felt that he wasn't appreciated by his colleagues. I think in general he was probably less happy than John. And they were two of the most visible people in that group. Then they actually both resigned shortly after Roger stopped being chair. So there were a lot of things going on during that period.

ASPATURIAN: Yes. A lot of ferment. A lot of activity.

Relationship between HSS humanists & social scientists: "By & large they were quite separate"

GRETHER: A lot of activity. And plans for where things were going. There were probably other things as well. I was conscious of these things, but I was mainly concerned about my responsibilities having to do with social science. Dan Kevles was the executive officer for humanities.



Grether with Roger Noll at an outdoor campus event in 1982. *Photo courtesy of Susan Grether*

ASPATURIAN: Did you work closely together?

GRETHER: Yes and no, in the sense that we saw and talked to each other a lot, but not really working together because the way the division is set up, it's kind of bifurcated. You had at that time, I think, only two people that were in both humanities and social sciences. Kousser, who in some sense is an extreme point in both faculties, and [Philip T.] Hoffman [Axline Professor of Business Economics and Professor of History] who is, if you like, an interior point in both faculties. I don't know if you know what I mean by that exactly, but I think, well, you probably do—you know Morgan.

ASPATURIAN: I spent a number of hours interviewing him.

GREETHER: But those are pretty much the only people that to my knowledge—

ASPATURIAN: That bridged both.

GREETHER: That bridged both. Well, Woodward did to a considerable extent—he's a philosopher of science. He left a few years ago; he took early retirement and went to the University of Pittsburgh. But he did some co-teaching with people. He and John Ledyard [Davis Professor of Economics and Social Sciences, Emeritus].

ASPATURIAN: And David Goodstein [professor of physics and applied physics, and Gilloon Distinguished Teaching and Service Professor, Emeritus; d. 2024]. They taught a course on science fraud together.

GREETHER: That could be. He never was formally in the social science faculty, but I could imagine that he could have been in some sense. He thought a lot about social science. But by and large, the groups were quite separate.

R. Vogt selected as provost over R. Noll, 1983; Noll steps down as HSS chair

ASPATURIAN: Why did Roger Noll step down?

GREETHER: That's an interesting question. I don't know. I mean, one has theories, but at the time, of course, people said, "I wonder if he knows something." People always wondered about that sort of thing. I can't give you a scientific answer to your question, okay? But if I had to give you my instinct or gut response, it'd be that he wanted to be provost.

ASPATURIAN: I have heard that story, yes.

GREETHER: As division chair, he couldn't serve on the provost search committee, but as a faculty member, he could. Now the puzzling thing to me is the chairman of the faculty at that time was Don Cohen. I know from what Don had said about him that he was not a fan. And so, when Roger steps down as division chair, he is immediately appointed to this faculty search committee for the provost; he and Kevles were the two divisional representatives. I've always been puzzled about why Don did that. If I had to guess, it was probably because Goldberger pushed Don to do it. I don't think Don thought much of Goldberger either, because there was this big controversy about an army center and all that stuff.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, yes, the Arroyo Center.

GREETHER: In any event, why Roger stepped down exactly I can't say, except I would guess it had to do with the provost search committee.

ASPATURIAN: This was the job that went to Robbie [Rochus E.] Vogt [professor of physics, emeritus, and provost, 1983–1987]. What I had heard in another series of oral history interviews, which have been published so they're a matter of record, is that Arnold Beckman [Caltech board of trustees chair, 1964–74; d. 2004] put his foot down at the possibility of Roger Noll becoming provost.

GRETHER: I don't know whether that's true or not. What I do know is that the committee made three recommendations, and Roger Noll was their first choice.

ASPATURIAN: Despite Don Cohen.

GRETHER: Despite whatever. I don't think Don Cohen was on the committee; I'm not positive about that, actually. But Roger Noll was the first choice, and Murph told me he was going with his name to the trustees. Robbie was choice No. 2. Whether or not this involved Arnold Beckman is an internal thing I don't know anything about. What is true is that Goldberger went with Noll and ended up with Vogt. What was probably also true is that Vogt knew that.

ASPATURIAN: I see. Yes. So that might have colored their relationship from Day One.

GRETHER: And he probably knew that other people knew it, too. I think—this is my belief, not based on anything scientific—that that was the source of their trouble.

ASPATURIAN: It started right at the get-go in other words, and they could not overcome that.

GRETHER: No.

Grether's perspective on Noll as HSS chair; succeeds Noll in position

ASPATURIAN: Interesting to reflect on what might have happened if Goldberger had had his first choice, and Noll had indeed become provost.

GRETHER: I have no idea. I used to say that in a place like this it would mostly be very inefficient to have a non-laboratory scientist as provost. It's a small place, and the provost gets involved in a lot of pretty nitty-gritty decisions that require a certain amount of knowledge. Roger did have—or seemed to have; I can't really say because I don't know—a quite general knowledge of what was going on in a lot of these different fields.

ASPATURIAN: He was a Caltech graduate—in mathematics, I think?

GRETHER: It might have been. Physics is also very good training for economics. Because physicists tend to take complicated systems and strip them down to their essence.

ASPATURIAN: Fundamentals.

GREETHER: Yes, and that's a good way to think about economic problems. If you just get all the bees in the hive, you can't deal with every one of them necessarily. So I think Roger could have coped with that.

ASPATURIAN: Despite the fact that he came out of this division.

GREETHER: Yes. There are other people who could have also, but from a different point of view. If you're really interested in how organizations function and you have a sense about that, you could structure things in an appropriate way. In Roger's case, he seemed to have firsthand knowledge of what was going on in the different divisions. He might have been able to deal with that. What he would have done vis-à-vis this division is harder to say. In some sense, the things he had going as division chair were largely on the humanities side. The conversion of lecturers to professorial positions—all that kind of thing. And there was less expansion on the social science side. I just don't know. I can't forecast that. It would have been different from what it was under Robbie Vogt, I'm sure.

ASPATURIAN: I imagine that's not debatable. So then you succeeded Roger as division chair. How did that come about?

GREETHER: I wasn't on that committee either. They had some process; I have no idea what it was. I was offered the position; didn't really want it.

ASPATURIAN: Not atypical for this campus.

GREETHER: Actually at the time when Roger got it, I probably would have.

ASPATURIAN: That's right, you were on the short list.

Grether "one of first people" in behavioral economics

GREETHER: But in the meantime, the main thing that had happened was I started working in this area between psychology and economics, and I really liked doing that.

ASPATURIAN: You had an active research program going.

GREETHER: I had a research program, and I thought that I was doing well. In academia if you want to be a success, you can't flit around from one area to the other, which is sort of what I had been doing. You really have to take an area and make it yours. You have to be one of the main players. I thought that I had a chance to do that in this area, which was at that time very new. I was one of the first people in it. Now it's big.

ASPATURIAN: Is this what we would call the precursor to neuroeconomics to some degree?

GREETHER: Or to behavioral economics; neuroeconomics is a subset of that. And so there weren't that many people doing it at that time. There were some, certainly. Colin Camerer [Kirby Professor of Behavioral Finance and Economics] was not quite

a child, but he was just beginning. I thought that in some sense if I was going to be a big shot academically—

ASPATURIAN: This is where you would make your contribution.

GRETHER: Yes. The thing is, you can't keep changing your focus. I'd started off as a time-series econometrician, and I'd done some non-time series work, metrics work, and I'd done some social choice and some experimental stuff. Then, this looked to me like a place I could actually go.

ASPATURIAN: Right, I understand.

Initial experiences & challenges as HSS chair:
dealings with provosts; professor to lecturer
conversions; departures in social science

GRETHER: When they actually offered me the division chair job, I spent two weeks mulling it over. I knew that if I took the job, it would cost me. I'm not a person who has a team. I collaborate with people: I have a project, and it may be with this guy or that guy or that person, you know, but it's not like being somebody who's head of a lab. The lab grinds on, no matter what you're doing.

ASPATURIAN: Like David Baltimore [Caltech president, 1997–2006; Nobel laureate, 1975; Millikan Professor of Biology], for example.

GREETHER: Yes. Or Lee [Leroy] Hood; someone like that. So I knew my work style involves a lot of sitting around and thinking, and I wouldn't be able to do that as division chair. So eventually I decided to do it, but it was actually not a decision that was a terribly easy one.

ASPATURIAN: It doesn't sound like it.

GREETHER: It's a silly thing to say, but I actually believed in the social science program the way it was structured. This combination of economics and political science was at least at that time working, and I felt it was important to keep it going and that it was something I should do. I was mainly concerned about that because that's the part I knew.

ASPATURIAN: I had heard that Dan Kevles was also interested in the job? Is that true?

GREETHER: It's possible. I wouldn't be surprised. He's probably lucky he didn't get it. He would not have enjoyed working with Robbie Vogt. No one did.

ASPATURIAN: So I understand.

GREETHER: It's difficult but fortunately, for this discussion at least, still in the future. [Laughter] Because during my first year as chair, [John D. "Jack"] Roberts [Institute Professor of Chemistry, Emeritus; Caltech provost, 1980–1983; d. 2016] was still the provost. I got along okay with Jack. We had one horrendous fight early on; I don't even remember what it was about

now. But it was pretty nasty. The thing about Jack was that he tended to use his hard of hearingness—

ASPATURIAN: Selectively?

GRETHER: Selectively, yes. And after this first situation where he essentially denied that he'd said something, I basically solved this problem just by yelling at him. Literally. Not angrily but making sure he understood exactly what I was saying. He could hear it and would acknowledge it. Then we got along fine. I rather liked Jack, quite a lot. I enjoyed working with him.



Caltech Photo



The HSS chairman in a semi-formal pose, 1986 (above); and at the grill at a campus BBQ in 1984. *Caltech Photo*

ASPATURIAN: So when you got into the division chair's office, what was your take on what was happening within the division? I mean you obviously knew the social science side pretty

well, but did you have to acquaint yourself with the other side of things?

GREETHER: One difference between myself and Roger is that Roger is a rather expansive person who has many ideas and is a very demanding person. I am probably much more conservative, and I don't mean that in the left-right sense.

ASPATURIAN: No, I know what you mean.

GREETHER: I don't want to get caught without having the resources to do what I think I can do. I'm probably more risk-averse in that sense. One of the things, for example, that concerned me had to do with the conversion of the lecturers to professorial positions. This uses a lot of resources, and let me explain why: The lecturer's full-time load is six courses, and a professor's full-time load is four. So, right there, we have an accounting problem. The other thing is that professors typically don't teach all service courses. They teach things that are in their domain of interest.

ASPATURIAN: So if all these people become professors, who's going to teach the service courses?

GREETHER: They're not all going to want to spend a lot of time doing introductory French. That much is quite clear. They're going to want to teach French history or literature, and if you're going to make them professors and give them their civil rights, so to speak, you have to let them do that. In addition to that, as

lecturers they're evaluated on teaching only. They're not evaluated on their research. Therefore, typically, they have not been supported for research. But if they're going to be treated like other professors on the basis of their research, you're going to need to have the resources to support that. Whether it's going to meetings or to archives or increasing the holdings of the library, it's going to be resource-using. So it looked to me like this conversion—if you're going to keep up the same level of teaching in languages—was going to require a lot more resources and a lot more people than we had.

Now, when I mentioned to you that these people had been converted from lecturers to instructors, there's one difference that I didn't mention, which is that you can only be an instructor for three years. Lecturer is a temporary appointment, but it can be renewed if a review shows that everything seems to be going all right. You cannot be, however, an instructor more than three years. And so I felt, as was the case with Aimée Brown Price and art history, that if in fact you open searches, it's almost pre-ordained that the people who are currently lecturers will lose out because however well they have been doing whatever they've been doing, they haven't been doing research. When you compare them with fresh PhDs, they're not going to look as good.

ASPATURIAN: Through no fault of their own.

GRETHER: It's not their fault. But that's what's going to happen, I thought, just looking ahead. And so with the blessing of the then-provost—

ASPATURIAN: Was that Robbie by this time?

GRETHER: It was probably still Jack Roberts. I don't remember. But in any event, I was not going to go off and do some wild thing on my own. I talked to the language lecturers individually and asked them if they realized that they could only be instructors with a maximum of three years, and they all swore they had no idea that was true. I suspect that they were probably telling the truth—that it was not explained to them that this was a terminal appointment. When asked, they all said they would prefer to remain as lecturers. So, that's what happened. One of the first things I did was to put an end to that professorial track because I was concerned about where we were going to get the resources to handle this kind of thing. So that was one thing on the humanities side of the division. The hiring freeze came later; that was Vogt. [See also Session [Three](#)]

ASPATURIAN: This was in the mid-'80s, the hiring freeze?

GRETHER: Well, see, I become division chair in 1982. Roberts is in for a year; then he is replaced by Vogt. And Vogt in his first year was dealing largely with Roberts's commitments, and so he didn't do things. It would have been in Robbie Vogt's second year that he announces this Institute-wide hiring freeze, with some exceptions in engineering, which I think expands by

some number of positions. Now when I say hiring freeze, it turns out what he meant was no increase. So that if somebody left, it didn't mean you lost the position. You could possibly replace them; it just meant no growth.

ASPATURIAN: No new positions would be created.

GRETHER: No new net positions for five years. That was the ringing down on that. At an inconvenient time. It didn't happen until after I had been in for two years, but it was done at a time when we had lots of commitments out, both in English and philosophy, and we had needs in social science, particularly with Ferejohn and Fiorina having left. They promptly resigned once Roger was no longer the division chair. Then shortly after that Bob [Robert H.] Bates left.

ASPATURIAN: He was a political scientist, I believe.

GRETHER: Political scientist. And then after that—I'm not quite sure in what year this happened—Jerry [Gerald H.] Kramer left also. He was, again, a senior political scientist. This was out of a relatively small group of half a dozen or so. These were very distinguished, nationally prominent people that were lost. If you're going to keep the program a really focused interdisciplinary program, you had to do something. You couldn't just let it go. And also that meant you couldn't just allow the majority group to go replicate itself. That would be the economists, and you couldn't just go hire more of them because that would just produce a small economics department, and it's not clear that

we would have anything like the focus in the same sense that we had before. So that was a big problem.

Efforts to bring “some possible focus” to humanities program

ASPATURIAN: You’ve talked about how one of the great assets of the social sciences as you saw it was that the program had a focus—kind of an integrated, coherent agenda. [See Session [One](#)] What was your sense of the humanities when you came in as chair?

GREETHER: Of course what happens is that the division chair attends the humanities faculty meetings as well, which I’d never done. Not even as social science executive officer. There’d be no real reason; you’d be viewed as a spy.

ASPATURIAN: [Laughter] Okay.

GREETHER: I think I may have said this last time—how I was listening to the arguments in the humanities faculty for things, and a persuasive argument would be that we have no one in that century or that continent. Rather than saying “We should focus ourselves,” the discussion was, “Here’s a hole; here’s something that we don’t cover.” It was almost the opposite of trying to get a focus. Again, I don’t know how chronological you want to be, because these kinds of things are a little difficult.

ASPATURIAN: That's fine.

GREETHER: One of the things I did try to do, and it was generally resisted, was to provide some possible focus. I think part of the trouble was having some economics guy come in there and say, "I want you to do this, that, and the other thing"; it generates resistance. But it seemed to me: You have the Huntington Library as an asset. That would have been a potential focus. It wouldn't mean you'd have to exclusively concentrate there, but you might think that people in fields where the Huntington's collections were particularly useful would be a good fit.

ASPATURIAN: Like Eleanor Searle [Wasserman Professor of History, Emeritus; d. 1999], for example.

GREETHER: Exactly. That would be a way of giving people some commonality to tie them together. In the case of the philosophy group, later on, after Brian Barry was gone, we hired Jim Woodward, who'd been here as an instructor with a postdoctoral fellowship, on to the faculty. This was when Robbie Vogt was the provost. I remember talking to him about philosophy as a group concept, and saying that the way things tend to be done around here is if you want to hire more philosophers you get somebody with a PhD in aesthetics and somebody in some other field.

But what's wrong with a model where you get people who share a common interest in philosophy of science, and who'll just agree that it's part of the social contract that they'll teach

introductory courses? You don't have a major; you're not giving PhDs or anything, so if someone's going to take a course in ethics, or whatever, it's going to be an introductory level course, and can't people with PhDs in philosophy teach that? That's the way the social sciences do it. If somebody teaches a course in monetary theory, that doesn't mean they're a monetary theorist; it just means, you know—

ASPATURIAN: They're teaching the course.

GREETHER: They're teaching the course. So instead of getting five people, each of whom specializes in five different things and don't talk to each other, why don't you get five people who can deal with each other? You agree that we will cover more, and we won't all dance on the head of the same pin when we do our teaching. What's wrong with that?

ASPATURIAN: You wanted to leverage some sort of cohesiveness.

GREETHER: Yes. Robbie seemed to think that was reasonable. They may have cheated on the social contract; that's another question. But in general it wasn't so easy to do that. Part of the problem is that any time you proposed something, and this kind of goes back to what I'd said earlier about coming into a new program in social science, there wasn't a lot of stuff there to constantly be fighting against. Well, you see, it's not true in the humanities. If you say all of a sudden, "Let's have a focus on, say, the Huntington," what does that say to Peter Fay [professor of history; d. 2004], who does Asian history, or what does

that say to a whole lot of other folks? And so they get their backs up.

ASPATURIAN: Right.

GREETHER: So you've got to try to figure what points of view make some sense. It seemed to me that was the real problem. It made humanities view the social sciences with alarm because they looked sort of monolithic, even though if you went to a social science faculty meeting you'd discover they appear to be at each other's throats pretty much all the time. But that's just because that's the way people are. The fact is that there still is some overall point to what they're trying to do. Now, of course, we're going about trying to find a new focus, a new set of foci.

ASPATURIAN: Did you have a vision for an intellectual agenda for the division as a whole? Probably not in your first months, but as you settled into the job and got to know the personalities and programs better?

GREETHER: I'm not quite sure. Barclay Kamb [Rawn, Jr., Professor of Geology and Geophysics, Emeritus; Caltech provost, 1987–1989; d. 2011], when he became provost, wanted something like that. He wanted some sort of a one-paragraph statement of what we were doing. I remember struggling with this, and Peter Ordeshook [professor of political science] put it best. He said, "You know, what this kind of thing says is, 'We're the division for the study of stuff.'" It's hard to think of a sensible, coherent summary that covers it all. If you looked at a real university and

said, “What do you do?” they’d say, “We educate people,” but they wouldn’t have other than gross generalities about standards and that sort of thing. They wouldn’t have something that explained why everybody fit what they did.

ASPATURIAN: Couldn’t reduce it to a haiku, in other words.

GREETHER: Yes. And so, in that sense, I never felt it was a *thing* that the division should be doing per se. Having said that, I assume we’re talking here about research as opposed to the teaching. Teaching is different: It’s easier to articulate that you’re going to provide a certain level of introduction to a certain menu of disciplines. But the research end of it—that’s trickier.

HSS’s relationship to Caltech’s scientific divisions

ASPATURIAN: What about the relationship of the HSS division to the other five divisions on campus? How was it regarded? What did you find when you began going to meetings with your fellow division chairs?

GREETHER: What do you mean, how was it regarded?

ASPATURIAN: How did the other divisions, none of which was dedicated in any sense to liberal arts or social sciences, see this one division on campus?

GREETHER: Probably with alarm. [Laughter]

ASPATURIAN: I mean, what was your sense as division chair? What kinds of attitudes did you encounter?

GREETHER: Actually, my impression was that they might not have cared deeply about whether we were successful or not. In some sense, it's not their problem. I got the impression they respected what we were doing, and that the main thing was to show them that we were operating with the same kind of standards that they had. And that, in some sense, may have been a change; I don't know. I wasn't there beforehand. But if there was one overarching message that I was giving those people all the time, that was it. And in that sense, I didn't have a sense that there was any lack of respect at all. Now, they may not have cared deeply if political science failed, and they might say, "I don't have any skin in that game per se." But they had to respect the fact that we were operating at the same levels and standards that they were. It seemed to me that as long as you did that, they were quite supportive and tolerant.

ASPATURIAN: That's kind of what I was getting at. I have a couple more questions and then I think we'll close this session.

GREETHER: One wears out.

ASPATURIAN: I know. Do you want to just stop now? We can pick up next time.

GREETHER: That's okay—but if you have something in particular?

Baxter Art Gallery; Jay Belloli hired as gallery director
& has notable successes

ASPATURIAN: Oh, it's about the Baxter Art Gallery and the circumstances—

GRETHER: That's a whole 'nother story. This is one I do want to get right. So let's see—not the Baxter Art Gallery but the art exhibition program predates me by quite a long time. I gather that both David Smith [professor of literature; d. 1990] and Robert Rosenstone [professor of history, emeritus] used to have shows in Dabney Lounge or something like that. When Baxter Hall became available, they moved in there, and the north end of the lower floor—the basement—was dedicated to an art gallery. I don't know, between Huttenback and Smith, who did that. I have no idea. It was there when I arrived at Caltech. It was something that Roger Noll cared a lot about. I think it was being run by a guy named Michael Smith. There was a support group—the Pasadena Art Alliance—and I was told that they had been supporters of the art museum that is now the Norton Simon, and that the Norton Simon fundamentally kicked them out. Whether that's true or not, I don't know.

Somehow they had attached themselves to the Baxter Art Gallery, and that was now their primary project. It's certainly the case that they were its primary supporters when I was involved with it. Roger wanted to upgrade those programs, and to that end, he hired a guy name of Jay Belloli.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, I know the name.

GRETHER: Jay came from Detroit, I believe. I'd said earlier that Roger was very concerned that these other programs fitted in, if you like, and should be part of the teaching and research of the division. To that end, Belloli didn't have a position as director of the art gallery. I believe he was actually appointed as a lecturer in art or something of that sort, because I remember Roger saying that he wanted the gallery to be part of the teaching program. That had some unfortunate consequences, not the least of which was that as a lecturer Jay never got to have retirement benefits.

ASPATURIAN: Whereas if he'd come in as a staffer, he would have had those benefits.

GRETHER: That's correct. So Jay comes in and takes over the art gallery, I think with expectations that they would expand the program and do something. He did really a good job. He got along very well with the Art Alliance. He also did a very good job making sure to have some programs that had a local connection. One year it was Bungalow Heaven [a neighborhood of historic Craftsmen homes in Pasadena]. One year it was the architects Greene and Greene. One year I think it was local Armenian artists. He did things that involved much more local support and managed to attract more interest. If you had gone to early openings of the art gallery shows, which Susan and I would do, there weren't very many people there, but when Jay took it over, he really raised the level of interest and activity a

lot. It really was doing well. He was quite good or fairly good about going out to raise money and grants and things like that to support shows and programs. So the art gallery improved its position a lot under Belloli. Roger wanted to have a fundraising drive to raise money for a new gallery, and Jack Roberts, I believe, was in sympathy with that.

ASPATURIAN: He was always interested in the arts.

“Blindsided” by expectations in first meeting with gallery’s board of governors

GRETHER: I remember my first meeting with something called the board of governors—which sounds sort of high and mighty—of the Baxter Art Gallery. It consisted of David Smith, who was running it at that time, and some Caltech faculty members. People like [Jesse] Greenstein [DuBridge Professor of Astrophysics, Emeritus; d. 2002], for example—and I’ve forgotten now who else was on it—and representatives from the Pasadena Art Alliance. They were major donors, this kind of thing. I remember David said he’d like me to meet these people since I was coming in as the new division chair, and I said, sure. They had a meeting scheduled, either in Judy Library or in one of the private rooms in the Athenaeum—some room where we were all sitting around a table. When I got there, I discovered that Roger was there—which I hadn’t known before—and that Roger ran the meeting and talked about the new things the gallery was going to do, and that as of today, the name of the Baxter

Art Gallery is for sale, and we're going to raise money, and *here is the person who's going to lead you*. I didn't know anything about this. It was a complete and total surprise, and I completely flubbed it.

ASPATURIAN: You were the person who was going to lead them?

GRETHER: Yeah.

ASPATURIAN: And you had no clue.

GRETHER: I did not know Roger was going to be there. I thought I was going to meet these people, and we'd get to know each other.

ASPATURIAN: Instead you're put on the spot.

GRETHER: And of course, first of all, I have an exploitable weakness: I really don't like to fight with people in front of other people, and so I just sort of blubbered and I'm sure looked like a total jerk. Which, given what happened later with the closing of the gallery, was probably not a good thing. It was a bad way to meet the new guy in town.

ASPATURIAN: Well, you were blindsided, it sounds to me. Maybe not intentionally.

GRETHER: I was totally blindsided. I came out of there looking bad.

ASPATURIAN: And not feeling good about it either, I'm sure.

GREETHER: Oh no, not at all. But later on at some point, David [Smith] said something like he'd learned that I don't like surprises. Well, it wasn't just surprises; I can tolerate some surprises, but I didn't like that one. Had I been prepared for that, I would have made some—but the thing is, I wasn't clear on what I was committing myself to. And I didn't want to say that I actually didn't know.

ASPATURIAN: What year is this; are we talking '84?

Caltech president Goldberger takes series of contradictory positions concerning gallery, ultimately announcing its closure

GREETHER: Probably. So Roger, after a couple years as the chair, leaves and goes off to Stanford. Jay was doing a terrific job running the gallery, but, you know, there are all these budgetary stresses and that kind of thing going on. Then at some point, I don't remember exactly when, Murph gives them \$25,000.

ASPATURIAN: The gallery or the Art Alliance?

GREETHER: The gallery. He budgets \$25,000 for a feasibility study to see whether or not it would be possible to raise money for a new gallery.

ASPATURIAN: Did they want to build something?

GREETHER: Yes.

ASPATURIAN: They wanted to erect a new structure on campus?

GREETHER: A new structure on campus. One of the arguments that had been made as to why the gallery was not more visible was that it was in the basement of Baxter and needed to be someplace else. Belloli actually proved that was not true, because in fact it did very well there when he was running it. But in any event, we got to actually start a fundraising drive to build a new gallery. This gift from Goldberger very much excited the Art Alliance people—"Oh, this is really great; he's behind this." Much later on, about the time it was all over, Murph said he had done that because he assumed—I don't know how you could assume this—that the result of the feasibility study was going to be, "No, you can't possibly do this." Well, first of all, it's naive to think that: People who are in the business of assessing fundraising prospects are not in the business of saying "you can't do it."

ASPATURIAN: That's true.

GREETHER: The other thing was that he didn't count on was how good Belloli was. And of course the report came back saying, "Yes you can do this." With some of the usual cautions, you know. And so—

ASPATURIAN: Who issued the report? Did they contract out?

GREETHER: They hired some outside company that explores fundraising possibilities.

They looked at the community, and they did whatever they did, and said, “Well, it’s possible. Not a slam dunk, but definitely possible.” Goldberger should not have been surprised that they didn’t tell him, “Oh no, you don’t want to have anything to do with this.”

In any event, the gallery was going along and doing well, and we had some proposed fundraising events that didn’t go off. Somebody had proposed something—it may have been for *Sulphur*, the literary magazine we had then; I’d forgotten about that—that involved some fundraising gimmick with local dignitaries. Basically, the division would buy out the Athenaeum and would sell tables, and I thought, “This sounds like a really risky thing. Why would I risk my entire budget for this—what if it doesn’t work, you know?” Anyhow, so we went along, and then one day I got a call from the president’s office. It was Goldberger saying the current president of the Pasadena Art Alliance and the incoming president were coming to have a meeting with him, and he was going to tell them that he was closing the gallery.

ASPATURIAN: This just came out of the blue.

GREETHER: Phone call. And I said, “Can I see you first? Can I come over?” He said sure. So I went over there, and I said to him, “This is really a stupid thing to do, and let me tell you why.

First of all, there is a group of people who support this, who have really no other connection to Caltech, and you're just going to piss them off. Why would you do that for no particular reason? Once you do this, all their support will vanish, and the budgetary impact will be whatever the cost of running it out will be, because you won't get anything anymore. You'll give yourself a black eye. If you really are concerned about the budget, which was the alleged complaint, why don't you just tell them they have two or three years, and at the end of that time they have to be off the Caltech budget and self-supporting. They won't like it."

ASPATURIAN: But it might motivate them to do something.

GREETHER: Also, that way, if it doesn't work, it's partly their fault. It's not you taking the heat for it. He listened to that argument, and then the ladies came in, and Murph said he was giving them a house for the gallery.

ASPATURIAN: Oh!

GREETHER: They seemed quite pleased at this idea.

ASPATURIAN: One of the campus houses?

GREETHER: Over on Holliston. And it would be easier for people to get to from that side of campus.

ASPATURIAN: So he listened to what you had to say, and kind of re-thought it.

GREETHER: Re-thought it and gave them a house. Now, what happened next, I don't know exactly. If I had to guess, when Murph got home, it hit the fan. When he told his wife about it —

ASPATURIAN: Mildred.

GREETHER: Mildred. I had talked to Mildred about the art gallery once at a social gathering at somebody's house, and she said, "If it were studio art, it would be okay, but simply art that you go look at, it's too much like being a film buff or a history buff. It's not the kind of art program we should have." So I believe, although I don't have any direct evidence, that she was the problem.

ASPATURIAN: Well, that's what has been more or less assumed over the years.

GREETHER: Well, some people thought I did it.

ASPATURIAN: That I have not heard.

GREETHER: To get computer space for the microeconomists. Jesse Greenstein took the position that this was all done to get specialty computers for the microeconomists.

ASPATURIAN: Well, okay.

GREETHER: Jenijoy La Belle believed that—I don't know.

ASPATURIAN: No, I don't think so. She has never talked about it at all.

Gallery closure goes over badly; Goldberger expresses retrospective regret

GREETHER: But in any event, what happens is that a month or two later, I receive in the campus mail a copy of a letter to the same two ladies, announcing the closing of the gallery. So he learned his lesson: Don't talk to me first; just go on record and do it. And now he can't back down.

ASPATURIAN: And of course it caused exactly the kind of uproar you predicted.

GREETHER: Of course. The Art Alliance was giving about \$70,000 a year in support, which immediately vanished, of course.

ASPATURIAN: And Jay Belloli was staging this show about space exploration, which was hugely popular. Its most successful show ever.

GREETHER: Hugely popular. But at least that's my belief in what happened. I think Roger probably thought I was the one who did it.

ASPATURIAN: What Annette Smith [professor of French, emeritus] said in her [oral history](#), and this is on the record so

people who think that you were responsible can go and read it, was that Goldberger said to her years later that it was the stupidest thing he'd ever done and he regretted it deeply.

GRETHER: Well, I'm sorry he did it, but it probably wasn't the stupidest thing he'd ever done, unfortunately. [Laughter]

ASPATURIAN: [Laughter] Well, okay.

GRETHER: The only explanation is that he got some heat about it at home. It didn't seem to me that it was a rational move. Either before or just after this happened, I'd written a memo that circulated around the administration, basically saying the same thing I'd originally told Goldberger. Jim [James J.] Morgan [Goldberger Professor of Environmental Engineering Science, Emeritus] said he'd read it, and he thought I was perfectly sensible. If you want to get rid of it, at least share the responsibility. And in fact having it in the division was probably a mistake. If you want to have something like an art gallery, it probably should come out of the administration that runs the university. It was in the division, because as I often say when someone asks what does humanities and social sciences mean, "it means not elsewhere classified." I think at Caltech that's roughly what it means. That's how it was that all the guitar lessons and that kind of thing were in the division—because if it didn't belong over there, you know, put it over here. Roger did, I think, the right thing in moving those activities into student affairs.

Revamping HSS academic classifications & addressing salary inequities

On that topic, one thing before we quit for the day: One of the first things I had to do when I became division chair was to deal with this question of grades in the performance and activities classes. Roger recommended that the people who taught these subjects should be given appointments as lecturers, so they could give grades. I talked to Jack Roberts, who was still provost, about it and said, "It seems to me that this is a mistake. If you make these people lecturers, which are faculty positions, you will raise expectations or give them some beliefs about rights and privileges that they might or might not have. And when they discover they don't have them, you'll end up with them just being discontented. So I don't see why you can't have people in this division who are not lecturers giving credit that is not actually divisional credit but institutional credit. I remember he said, "Good decision." He liked that.

ASPATURIAN: He *was* able to hear you say that.

GRETHER: Right. He said, "Otherwise all you're doing is creating a bunch of bogus faculty appointments," and he understood that the long-run consequences were going to be that someone's going to end up being unhappy, almost surely, so. We'd kind of seen that with situations that we'd had before. And I think the lecturers became less discontented once their situation was defined to them.

One of the other things I did—and it took me until [Paul] Jennings [professor of civil engineering and applied mechanics, emeritus; Caltech provost, 1989–1995; 2004–07] was provost, toward the end of my ten years as division chair. I struggled all along to try to get retirement benefits for the lecturers. I remember that the first time I brought it up, one of the other division chairmen said, “Those jobs shouldn’t be desirable; they shouldn’t be something that people do over and over again.” I said, “But in our division they do. You may bring somebody in who wants to teach a single class and call them a lecturer; that’s fine, and there’s no reason you should have to set up a retirement account for them, but we have people who do this over and over again. *It is a career*. It may not be a full-time career, but it is something that they do repeatedly.”

So eventually when Jennings was provost, we got it set up so that we created a position called long-time lecturer. These people get TIAA-CREF retirement benefits, and they also get rolling three-year appointments, so they always have at least a two-year horizon, rather than a series of three-year appointments, which might be end-to-end with a review where you never know what’s going to happen. That was a big thing. I worked hard for that. And while we’re talking about non-academic things, one thing I was particularly pleased about accomplishing when I became division chair had to do with staff salaries. One of the things that had been frustrating when I first got here was that if you were working on a paper, you wrote it out and then handed it to a secretary and she—usually it was

she—typed it up. And if she was any good at her job, in a few months she had gone elsewhere within the Institute to a higher wage. And so I think it was when Janet Howell came in and became the supervisor of staff, I had her do a survey and what we discovered was that every staff person in the division, whatever grade they were in, was below the salary median.

ASPATURIAN: For the campus?

GRETHER: For the campus. It's something you can't fix with annual raises because in your annual raise pool, you get a four percent increase, or whatever it is that year, of your salary, but everybody else is getting that, too, so the median goes up. And so I actually was able to use that inequity to get an additional lump sum in the divisional budget—a permanent increase to bring our staff up to the point where they were paid the same as people in other divisions. That was to me a big accomplishment. Not because the staff's happiness is an end in itself, but because a productive and well-working staff is a very important thing for the institution as a whole. And here we were trying to do research and teaching, and all this, and we had trouble keeping people. Because they could always get more money elsewhere. So I was fixing that.

ASPATURIAN: How far into your tenure were you able to accomplish that?

GRETHER: Pretty early. The lecturer thing took longer—if the provost wasn't sympathetic, there was no point in arguing it

over and over again. Jennings said he could see why it made sense to have these long-term lecturers be eligible for retirement benefits. One of the things that provoked this was that when they converted all the lecturers to instructors, they got retirement benefits, and when they converted them back to lecturers, they didn't anymore. But one did. Our accounting office probably screwed up, and so for ten or more years, some number of years—

ASPATURIAN: One person.

GREETHER: One person did quite well. [Laughter] That was just a screw-up on our end. But the fact is, with things like languages you have people who have taught here for years and years.

ASPATURIAN: That's right, and are very good at it.

GREETHER: They get reviewed, so we make sure they're doing fine. We did eventually get them retirement benefits.

ASPATURIAN: That was a good accomplishment. I think we should stop.

GREETHER: I definitely should.

SESSION 3, FEBRUARY 6, 2018

Overview of HSS faculty hires under Grether

ASPATORIAN: When we left off last time, I think you were about halfway through your tenure as chair of the division.

GREYER: I doubt it, but it's conceivable.

ASPATORIAN: We finished up with an account of what happened with the Baxter Art Gallery, which I think was in '85.

GREYER: Yes. That may have been '85, but there are things that took place earlier that we haven't talked about.

ASPATORIAN: One of the things that I noticed, looking at that decade, was that you brought in a whole variety of new faculty hires, and, it seems, really revitalized aspects of the division. Some of the names I have, which I think I sent you —

GREYER: Yes, you did.

ASPATORIAN: Diana Buchwald [Kormos-Buchwald, Abbey Professor of History], Doug Flammig, John Ledyard, James Lee, John Sutherland, Cindy Weinstein [Broad Professor of English], Peter Ordeshook. Will you talk about the thinking that went into some of these hires.

GRETHER: Let's go back, if I may.

ASPATURIAN: Of course.

Early involvement in HSS faculty recruitment & salary issues

GRETHER: Before we get to the hires, we also had departures, which had as much to do with that as anything. I become chair in '82, starting in the fall, and the first thing you really get involved in is when the recruitment gets going, particularly for junior faculty. It tends to be at a specific time of the year, at least in the humanities and social sciences; that's less true in the lab sciences because the new faculty are chosen from postdocs. So it's early on in the year, and for the first time, particularly for a new chair, you learn about incomes and salaries. The chairman doesn't really set salaries—the provost does, so if you're going to recruit someone, whatever offer is made is negotiated with the provost.

That process is a tricky one, as you might guess. You have to try to pick a number. And in humanities and social sciences, unlike the laboratory divisions, something like a salary is pretty much it. In the laboratory sciences, a much bigger consideration for new faculty is startup and rehab costs and what sort of expenses will be allowed—that kind of thing. In this division, most people are what you might call lonely hearts, if you like. They don't have large numbers of research assistants or laborat-

ory assistants or anything like that. And their offices are what they get, you know.

So that means that income is the primary thing that you're dealing with in recruitment. You may have some research support, but that's usually not a big thing in new hires' minds. So it's important to get those salary numbers right. Now from the point of view of the chair, if you want to err, you want to err on the high side. There's several reasons for that, or a couple anyway. One is the way the salary system works: If you initially make a low offer and it's accepted, it's extremely difficult over time to correct that. Because what happens is that each year, you get a fund to be used for professorial salary increases—two percent, five percent, whatever—and that has to be distributed across everybody. And so if you have somebody who is \$20,000 too low, you can't make that up without taking that amount away from everybody else. So you don't ever want to bring in somebody too far down the salary scale, because if they discover that, or other people discover that, you can't correct that. You don't want to encourage people to go out and get outside offers to get a salary raise; you want to keep them happy. Too high an offer isn't usually subject to those kinds of restrictions. You have to be a little bit careful, because while offers are confidential when you put them out, you know what they are, and the recipient knows. The recipient isn't bound to keep it a secret.

And typically the offers that get known are the rejected ones, either high or low. You don't want someone to say, "Oh, my

God, you offered him that, and I'm only getting"—you know, that kind of thing. That's a large part of what you do have to worry about. Accepted offers are almost never published—people don't run around and tell about themselves. They talk about offers they didn't accept because they were too low, and when that gets around, people say to the division chair who made the offer, "Why couldn't you do better?" That is a big thing that division chairs have to worry about. The actual process doesn't just operate in a vacuum. Quite apart from the information you have, any suggestions you make are reviewed by the provost and are subsequently reviewed by all the other division chairs.

ASPATURIAN: I did not know that. Okay.

"Solomonic" salary negotiations with provost J. Roberts

GRETHER: So there's a fair amount of looking at these things. People will ask, "Why this, or why that?" or how do you explain that this is a bigger raise than last year. People look at these things, and they do care about it. The reason I'm saying this is that it may have implications for some things we'll talk about later. If somebody is hired, let's say, with a salary that is out of line, particularly if it's low, then you have a problem, and if the provost is not easily budged to adjust it upward, then that becomes a difficult thing. One thing that I think is a little dicey to bring up here is that during my first year as chair, I dis-

covered a letter that Roger [Noll], the previous chair, had written to a faculty member in the division. It promised him a raise of at least ten percent per annum in any year in which the Institute salary pool was five percent or more. This wouldn't have bothered me so much, except that it also said, "This will continue as long as I or my successor is the chair." And so when I got to the stage of going to see the provost, who at the time was Jack Roberts, with my suggested salary increases, we went through the list, and I showed him the letter. He read it and he said, "You got any more like this?"

ASPATURIAN: [Laughter]

GRETHER: [Laughter] I said, "No, I don't." My suggestions did not satisfy the promise, and they missed by a substantial amount.

ASPATURIAN: So you did not feel committed to that ten percent.

GRETHER: No. I had known nothing about it. In fact, you can't tie the hands of your successor, and I wanted to make that clear at the beginning. But then Roberts said he didn't like this discrepancy, and I said, "Well, I really think there should be one because I don't want to feel bound by Roger's commitment." He said, "Well, I think we should get very close to the increase that was promised. Just miss it by a little bit." "Okay, well, all right." He goes to the salary list, and he says, "He made the promise; let him pay for it." And he took money away from Noll and transferred it to this other person.

ASPATURIAN: It's like King Solomon and the baby.

GRETHER: Kind of. But you see, later I said to Roger, "This wasn't my decision," which I doubt that he believed, because he knew how the process worked, having done it himself. This may well have caused some souring because he did leave a couple years later.

ASPATURIAN: It may have contributed to his departure.

GRETHER: It may have contributed to that; that's correct. That's the reason I bring that in—that there was this problem that came up because of this Solomon-like gesture. The first year then, other than this, I don't recall any major rows. At the end of the year, there was the problem we talked about where Vogt becomes provost. I think we talked about that transition a bit—the Vogt–Goldberger issue. [See Session [Two](#)]

ASPATURIAN: That's right, yes.

Provost Vogt denounces “uncontrolled growth” of HSS & announces campuswide hiring freeze;
problems & hostilities ensue

GRETHER: Vogt becomes the provost [in 1984], and in his first year, he essentially said, “Look, everybody—meaning the division chairs—has negotiated with Jack. Searches are under way; things are going on; I'm not going to tear everything up.” So it really wasn't until his second year that he comes in and begins

asserting himself. Goldberger had started—I think he was the one who started—something they used to call the IAC retreat, and it takes place usually in September. It includes not just the division chairs, but all the vice presidents and the chairmen of the faculty—

ASPATURIAN: It's the Institute Academic Council, I believe?

GRETHER: Yes. There were actually three IACs at one point, and that caused trouble with the mailroom.

ASPATURIAN: I can imagine.

GRETHER: One was the insurances and annuities committee, and that name was easily changed to the benefits committee. But then there was a large IAC committee, and then there was the smaller subcommittee, which was the division chair, president, and provost, and was also at that time called the IAC, which led occasionally to documents going to where they shouldn't go—anyhow, we won't worry about that. We met in La Jolla, at quite a nice place on the beach down there. Vogt had asked for future plans as to growth and new appointments from each division chair beforehand, so these were all compiled. During that meeting, he gets up and he starts giving his account of what had gone on in the few previous years. Much of it had to do with describing the increases and growth in this division.

ASPATURIAN: HSS.

GREETHER: HSS. He characterized it as being almost uncontrolled, whatever. Robbie could get rather worked up about things. I don't know if you know him well, but—

ASPATURIAN: I have never met Robbie Vogt, but I've heard so much, I feel that I have.

GREETHER: Well, he can really raise the volume level quite a bit. And at one point when he was castigating the division for something and looking at me, I said, "Don't look at me; I didn't have anything to do with it." And he said, "It doesn't matter; it was your division."

ASPATURIAN: Did you think at the time that his knowledge that Noll had been Goldberger's first choice for provost prompted him to kind of launch this attack on how Noll had run the division?

GREETHER: Yes.

ASPATURIAN: Okay.

GREETHER: He went through all this, castigating what the division had done and culminates this by announcing a hiring freeze.

ASPATURIAN: In the division.

GREETHER: In the Institute.

ASPATURIAN: In the Institute. Oh, yes, you referred to this last time. [See Session [Two](#)]

GREETHER: No new appointments for five years. You can replace, but no new appointments. The exception being, I think, that engineering could have two or something like that. That was one of the worst days of my life. The anger that was directed at me by the other people in the room was unbelievable.

ASPATURIAN: Were they aware of the backstory to this?

GREETHER: I doubt it.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, boy.

GREETHER: I remember, for example, the division chair in geology, Peter Wyllie [professor of geology, emeritus], suggesting that every professor in the division should have their salaries lowered.

ASPATURIAN: In your division?

GREETHER: Yes. Don Cohen, who was the chairman of the faculty, who was sitting right across the table from me, was so angry. It was almost like being in the first row of the theater when the actors spray a bit. He said that *no one* in Development should *ever* do *anything* to support Humanities and Social Sciences, unless they could show that they had no other productive use of their time.

ASPATURIAN: He said this to you directly or in front of—

GREETHER: In front of everybody. So this was how it was.

ASPATURIAN: Of course, Don Cohen was not a fan of Roger Noll as you articulated in the last interview.

GREETHER: Yes. So this was a devastating thing. I'd have to live with that. I thought, "Well, it doesn't do any good to quit." There's a certain temptation to doing that, you know. But I thought at the time, and this did color my relationship with Vogt to some extent, that what was really going on was not an attack against me but an attack against Goldberger.

ASPATURIAN: Because of the—

GREETHER: That was my interpretation of it.

ASPATURIAN: I think you're probably right.

GREETHER: But that he didn't have the courage or forthrightness to do that up front. Goldberger being in the room, of course, while this is all going on.

ASPATURIAN: Did any of your colleagues come up to you privately and say that Vogt seemed to be out of control with his broadside?

GREETHER: No. [Laughter] They'd seen him like this before, and they'd see him like it later. I hesitate to bring it up, but it was

something that made an enormous amount of difference to me. And it did affect my relationship with him.

ASPATURIAN: Of course. It was an irrational attack.

Problematic philosophy appointments

GRETHER: But anyhow, beyond that, when it became known that he'd made up this hiring freeze, even though it was "my fault" in some sense, it affected everyone. What became particularly critical was that one of the people who had been hired just before I became chairman, whom I think I mentioned [Session [Two](#)] was a philosopher named Brian Barry. He did philosophy that was kind of related to social science. He was, as he pointed out, on the board of the *American Political Science Review*, and he had an appointment at Chicago in the philosophy department as well as in the political science department, which Roger said was just a courtesy appointment, and it may have been—I don't know. He was appointed here as a member of the humanities faculty, not in the social science faculty; he was never even discussed in social science. He had a letter from Roger.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, is this the one promising him the five —

GRETHER: The five positions.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, yes, you talked about this last time as well. [See Session [Two](#)]

GREETHER: And that, as you might guess, caused an enormous amount of trouble.

ASPATURIAN: Of course.

GREETHER: Because now, we've got this freeze. Those five would have had to come out of the hide of the rest of the division, literally, because all I could do is replace positions. The only way you're going to get new people in one place else is to tear down someplace else. So that put a lot of constraints on what I did.

ASPATURIAN: Did you feel honor-bound to abide by that particular assurance?

GREETHER: No.

ASPATURIAN: I see.

GREETHER: One reason I didn't—well, there are two things. One is that I had asked Roger before I became chair whether there were any such—

ASPATURIAN: Commitments?

GREETHER: Commitments. And he said, no. Now there are two possibilities: One was that he didn't tell the truth; the other was that he was telling the truth and thought, "There's a good idea," and went home and did it. I don't know which. Barry definitely had this letter, which implied that the president and

the provost had bought into it. Another reason that I didn't feel compelled to go along with it was that Brian Barry was not a newborn. He knew that Roger was out-going—he had talked to me before I became division chair—and he knew that I was, at best, cautious and not going to make an unconditional commitment. For one thing, I knew that Roberts wouldn't. So I felt that “You're a big boy; you came here; you know that the previous chair's promises are not necessarily binding on the subsequent chair.” I told him, “Take your chances like everybody that you'll get treated fairly; we're not sharks here, you know.”

So I didn't feel that particularly obligated under the circumstances, and in any event, given the problems that we had, I didn't feel bad about it. Nor did I feel guilty about it. He knew what he was doing when he took the job. But he did make a lot of fuss. The letter would be handed out in faculty meetings, and we would talk about the honor of Caltech and all that kind of thing. And you just don't know with Robbie Vogt—maybe that would have scored a point with him. But Robbie did not relent on the basis of that, in any event. Those kinds of pressures hit in the second year and made for a certain amount of unpleasantness.

ASPATURIAN: Baptism by fire, as they say.

GREETHER: Yes. But anyhow, you started to ask about other appointments later.

Faculty recruitments & faculty departures in HSS; “unpopular discontinuance” of art history

ASPATURIAN: Yes, you bought in some dynamic new hires. Quite a few. Would you like to talk about how some of those people were selected? Particularly in the face of this.

GREETHER: Well, first of all, the freeze wasn't quite as draconian as you might have feared because replacements were allowed. So there was some turnover. In fact, as I think I mentioned last time, we had a number of people in the social sciences who left — four senior political scientists left. Those were all big losses. Ferejohn and Fiorina went to Stanford and Harvard; [Robert] Bates went to Duke and then to Harvard, and [Gerald] Kramer went out of academia. So we had lots of work to do there. In terms of the order in which things occurred, I don't really remember. The first appointment must have been John Sutherland in literature because he was visiting here. Roger was the chair when John came. He was a wonderful person to have around.

ASPATURIAN: Quite a catch.

GREETHER: And in addition to being distinguished, he was an excellent citizen and a delightful person. When he indicated an interest in staying, we managed to get that appointment through. I've forgotten who was provost; that was probably before the lid came down.

ASPATURIAN: I can check. [In 1984, the provost was Vogt.]
Would this have just been a replacement for someone in the humanities, or did you specifically replace literature people with literature people?

GRETHER: That was a subject of great debate, as you might guess, because the hiring lid is put on the division rather than on individual groups per se. And so there's always great concern amongst the various groups. Now that does not mean that you can't reallocate if you choose to. One thing that I did that was exceedingly unpopular was the discontinuance of art history. The reason for that was this freeze, together with the fact I didn't think it was viable with one person teaching it, and then all these other demands that had come on. That was one example where there would have been major unhappiness if that position had not been used to hire someone in humanities. It would have been really bad.

In other cases, it's less clear. We had—let's see, I don't remember when Stuart Ende left. But he was a tenured associate professor.

ASPATURIAN: Right, I remember him in connection with what Jenijoy La Belle said about her tenure case in her oral history.

GRETHER: It was while I was division chair, toward the latter end of it. I think it might have been when Eleanor Searle was the executive officer for humanities. I don't remember exactly what year that was. [It was 1989–90, and Searle was executive

officer. –*Ed.*] That was a negotiation between Stuart and myself for him to leave, which he did.

ASPATURIAN: But he had tenure.

GRETHER: Yes, he did.

ASPATURIAN: But you felt it was more appropriate for him to be elsewhere?

GRETHER: Yes. So did his colleagues.

ASPATURIAN: Any particular reason? Was he not producing?

GRETHER: No. Basically, he was functioning as a lecturer. He would teach his classes.

ASPATURIAN: No research credentials to speak of?

GRETHER: Not any ongoing research. He was one of three people in the division who got a degree from the Southern California Psychoanalytic Institute—I think Louis Breger [professor of psychoanalytic studies, emeritus] was maybe involved in founding it.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, he wrote a biography of Dostoevsky [*Feodor Dostoevsky: The Author as Psychoanalyst*, 1989].

GRETHER: Stuart and then later Mac [George] Pigman [professor of English] both got degrees there, and they both became, though in orders of magnitude of difference, analysts. And for

Stuart, that was his primary occupation. So coming here was in some sense a loser from his point of view, because it took his time away from one thing and the other. He just needed a university connection; he didn't need the job per se. And so we worked out an arrangement with him, and we were all better off as a result of that. And his open position was probably used as one of the literature appointments later on. With Sutherland, we were lucky enough to hire him, and he stayed and was a wonderful colleague; and even after he left and went back to England, he came back for several years on a visit.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, I recall.

GRETHER: John liked to teach, and he did a good job at it. I remember the year we had something like 130 students sign up for his class, which is what happens if you give a class called *Offensive Literature*. Of course, it involved reading things like *Jude the Obscure*, which was probably not what they were expecting. But he was a wonderful colleague, and people, I think, liked him and got along with him. Very personable guy. He left right about the time I stopped being chair, although that was not why he left.

ASPATURIAN: I know he got this great offer from the University of London, to become the Lord Northcliffe Professor, I think it was.

GRETHER: So John Sutherland was certainly a major appointment that we did at that time. I'm not sure whether Ron Bush

came in then or under Noll. [It was in 1982.] It might have been when I was chair, because I seem to recall them house-hunting and coming by our house to visit, something like that. Or it may have been that the offer was made under Roger.

A major appointment on the social science side was John Ledyard. He had been offered a position here previously and turned it down. He was at Northwestern. And then we approached him again while I was the chair, and our big opponent, if you like—

ASPATURIAN: Rival.

GRETHER: Rival. Our rival in this was Huttenback, who was trying very hard to recruit him to Santa Barbara. I don't know what all he offered him. And in fact I was very worried that he would not come, that he would go to Santa Barbara. I believe what made him actually come here was [Richard] Dick McKelvey [Wasserman Professor of Political Science; d. 2002]. Basically he talked to John about the work he could do here, compared to what it would be like at Santa Barbara, and Dick was a very persuasive person, very concentrated on his work; he was not an outgoing party animal type at all. He was a very sincere guy, and he persuaded John, I think, more than anybody else, to come, which proved to be a great benefit to the program. John then of course became division chair after I stepped down. He'd been my executive officer.

T. Palfrey becomes first HSS PhD graduate hired onto social science faculty

One other person we recruited on the social science side was Tom Palfrey [Flintridge Foundation Professor of Economics and Political Science].

That was an interesting one because Tom had been a graduate student here.

ASPATURIAN: Did he get a PhD?

GRETHER: His PhD was here, yes. He was an excellent student, and he did very well, and then he got a job on the faculty at Carnegie Mellon. He was extremely productive there and was appointed up to full professor. He had plenty of external validation. There was never any doubt that he was a star. Also as a product of this program, he was really in both political science and economics, and so when John Ferejohn and Mo Fiorina left

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ASPATURIAN: He kind of filled that niche.

GRETHER: He filled that niche perfectly. I remember talking to John Ferejohn after he left about what we should do and he said, “Why don’t you just hire Palfrey?” And so we did that. I was not concerned about Tom fitting in the program, but I was a little concerned about what would happen at the administrative level, and whether or not there would be resistance to that.

This was a small graduate program, and a fairly young one, and we'd never hired one of our own students before.

ASPATURIAN: You were concerned about resistance within the division?

GREETHER: No, within the administration above the division.

ASPATURIAN: Really? Because Caltech in the lab sciences often hires back its own students.

GREETHER: Yeah, but I was concerned that for this program they might look at it differently. And so even though in some sense, there was all the validation in the world—quite apart from letters of reference, it was clear, just looking at what he'd done, that he fit and was a very distinguished person. But then, when the faculty voted to hire Tom, they also voted to hire a junior guy who was a graduate student someplace.

He did empirical studies of income distributions in Caribbean nations or something like that, and there were some people in the division who really thought we needed somebody who did data in a big way. I was concerned, not knowing what the administration's response to the hiring of a student would be. Lab sciences are differently because everybody has their own group, and in fact here you typically don't have more than one or two people working within an area—

ASPATURIAN: That's right.

GREETHER: So this would be—it's a different kind of a structure.

ASPATURIAN: I understand.

GREETHER: So I actually called a meeting of the social science faculty and told them I wasn't going to take the other appointment forward—that I was afraid it would jeopardize the Palfrey appointment, which I felt was of singular importance for the group at that time. I just wasn't going to take this possibly worthy person forward because I didn't understand how I could make the argument that this is our focus and this guy is what we really need, but while we're hiring him, we're also going to get something completely different for a change of pace. It makes me nervous to be making those two arguments on the same day, so I'm not going to do it. And they acquiesced to that, and fortunately we were able to hire Tom, and he's been very successful and very good for us.

Recruitment of faculty specializing in Asian history

Let's see—on the humanities side, I think you mentioned James Lee. As I recall, at some point, Peter Fay had made a strong pitch in the humanities faculty for people who did Asian history. Because his subject was India.

ASPATURIAN: Right, and also, of course, because of the student body.

GRETHER: Yes. To that end, I believe they brought in two people, James Lee and [Nicholas B.] Dirks.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, Morgan Kousser talked about him. Nick Dirks, I believe?

GRETHER: Nick Dirks, that's correct. The late departed chancellor at Berkeley.

ASPATURIAN: That's right. Yes, under a cloud.

GRETHER: Quite a cloud. Dirks was here I think as a postdoc, or he may have come in directly as an assistant professor—I don't remember. They both ultimately left, but not while I was division chair. James in particular I thought did really interesting work.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, I remember we published and publicized some of it in public relations.

GRETHER: Yes, and I tried to support him a lot, and I think he recognized that and appreciated it. Nick, less so. I tried once to read something he wrote and failed miserably at the attempt. I don't think I was chair when he left, but I don't remember if it was Jean Ensminger [Wasserman Professor of Social Sciences] or John [Ledyard]. He left and went off, I think, to Michigan, as did James. James is now dean of social sciences or something like that at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

ASPATURIAN: He's done very well.

GREATHER: Yes. And Nick is now at Berkeley, a faculty member. But this was sort of the outgrowth of Peter Fay wanting to bring in somebody in Asian history. And as I mentioned last time, one of the big differences between the humanities and the social science faculties is that the social science faculty has a program that they hire to, and the humanities faculty doesn't.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, you talked about how the humanities are more ad hoc.

GREATHER: Well, they hire to fill something we don't have, and that was really the argument that Peter Fay had made. Now while we receive these grants for postdocs in humanities—

Humanities postdocs; Vogt's resistance to redressing salary inequities & his "rather volatile" personality

ASPATURIAN: Yes, I wanted to talk with you about that also, because it seems to have been one of your major initiatives.

GREATHER: One of the people we brought in under that program was Jim Woodward. I don't remember where all he'd been, but he had been at places where he probably worked his tail off in spite of having quite a distinguished publication record. He came here with the research support and lighter teaching load as a Mellon Postdoc, did extremely well, and was then recruited onto the faculty from that postdoc position. That was when Vogt was the provost. Jim was sort of an ideal candidate for the division because he was active and interested in the philosophy

of social science and various things about that. He definitely felt at home in the division. And in fact he probably felt more at home in this building [Baxter Hall of the Social Sciences] than he did in Dabney [Hall of the Humanities]. He was unhappy when he had to move to Dabney, but he was from my point of view also a wonderful colleague.

One problem with Jim was because he'd been a postdoc, his salary as a postdoc was substantially less than what you would have gotten as an assistant professor. I remember arguing with Vogt about this, but he was adamant about it: "We don't have to pay him that much; he will stay for less." That was true, but what it meant was that it was a continual battle to get him to where he was paid as much as his colleagues, because if you've got other good people, you've got to reward them too. That's one of the reasons I brought this up earlier [Session [Two](#)], because I have some sense he probably knew that he wasn't as well-paid as some of his colleagues. Or he knew what the bump was between what he had as an assistant professor and, for instance, what he had before.

ASPATURIAN: Why do you suppose Vogt took this attitude? Was it just a dismissive attitude toward HSS, because I can't imagine that a postdoc moving to a tenure-track position in one of the sciences—

GRETHER: I don't know. He just said, "We don't have to pay him that much."

He made the assertion. And it was correct on that day, but it caused trouble down the road. It was really hard to deal with. Vogt was—could be—a difficult person.

ASPATURIAN: Did your relationship improve at all after that untoward outburst at the retreat?

GREETHER: Yes and no. That was certainly the low point of it, as you might guess. Robbie was a rather volatile person.

ASPATURIAN: So I gather.

GREETHER: But I learned—he had a need to dominate.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, I understand that, too.

GREETHER: I remember for example that one year at the end of the meeting with all the division chairs, he said, “Look at your faculty. If there’s somebody there whose pay is way out of line—I don’t mean \$500, but somebody where there is a real problem—bring me the name of that person and prepare a case, and I have some money in reserve to take care of these kind of cases.” So, what do you do? He says, bring him one—hell, I’ll bring him two. And so I did. I brought up two cases that were quite different; both were people I felt were substantially underpaid compared to their peers either here or outside.

ASPATURIAN: Who were these? Was Woodward one of them?

GRETHER: No, he was not one of them. That was a separate thing. I don't want to go into names if you don't mind.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, okay.

GRETHER: Woodward probably would have just been hired. These were more senior.

And so I brought them in. Vogt went through them, listened, and said, "You're right; these are problems—you agree that this person is the more critical one, right?" I knew that if I agreed with him, that would be the one, and so I said, "I think this other one should be—" and he didn't like that. And so we went round and round about it. Now mind you, as provost he has the authority to set salaries. He could just have said, "Okay, I'm choosing this one." We could have ended the thing right there. Instead, we had a long, long, very unpleasant meeting about it, and then the next day we met again on the same issue, and he would get himself worked up and threaten what he would do to the division, dah-dah-dah; and we had a third meeting the third day on, and all the time it was clear that what he wanted me to do was to cave in. It was ludicrous because I didn't have to cave in; he was the provost.

ASPATURIAN: Right, I understand. His decision.

GRETHER: Yeah. But I wouldn't. I couldn't just sit there and be a jerk; you have to give arguments and that kind of thing. It was awful. I remember for two nights I didn't sleep because we were

going through all this stuff. Anyway on the third day, he ran up against a budgetary deadline when he had to turn these things in, and he gave me both of them. I always thought this told me something about him. He really needed me to concede that *he knew*. All this time and energy and emotion spent on it was really a waste. But that was something about his personality.

On the other hand, I remember we had another occasion where I think it was Dan Kevles thinking of leaving. He had an offer from Cornell. He wrote me a letter in which he listed all the things that he felt would keep him here. Most of these I communicated to Robbie. There were some things I didn't mention—some things I knew would set him off. Dan wanted his wife to have a locker in the gym. I thought, "Well, Jesus, if I tell Vogt this, I just know what he would say: 'You mean he's going to change his whole career because his wife doesn't get a locker in the gym?'" This kind of thing would just drive him crazy.

But the more substantive things I'd communicated. At some point Robbie, when speaking to Dan about this, said something to the effect of "What do you want?" and Dan said, "I've put it in writing, everything I want, and Grether has it." So I get a call from Vogt, who says, "Is it true?" He has this kind of deep voice when he gets on the phone, and I said, yes, and he said, "Send it over right away, blah-blah-blah," and he gives me all this emotion, and so the next day, I got a call from him, and he said, "You were right," and he gets very abusive about "all this

chickenshit stuff.” So sometimes we got along well; sometimes we didn’t.

“An excellent administrator when he wasn’t crazy”

He could be an excellent administrator when he wasn’t crazy. The trouble was, he’s frequently crazy. And that’s the upside and the downside of it, you know. I got along with him pretty well, overall, but it takes its toll on you.

ASPATURIAN: Of course.

GRETHER: I can remember when Barclay Kamb became the provost saying to him in our first meeting that it’s like having a giant clothespin removed from your nose. [Laughter] And that was the way I thought about it.

ASPATURIAN: Were you surprised when Vogt was sort of unceremoniously separated from his job?

GRETHER: Well.

ASPATURIAN: I was here by then; I remember.

GRETHER: The answer is yes and no, because you never know exactly the timing of these things. It was very clear to me, I thought, that Vogt’s behavior towards Goldberger was predicated on the idea that Goldberger couldn’t fire him. But the trustees are corporate boys. And girls, but mostly boys.

ASPATURIAN: In those days, certainly.

GREETHER: And they don't put up with that kind of shit in their divisions—in their own bailiwicks. At some point, Goldberger got the sense that he could do it, and he just did it.

Caltech presidents M. Goldberger, T. Everhart, JL Chameau

ASPATURIAN: What was your take on Goldberger as president overall? One of the reasons I ask this is because if you remember when I said last time [Session [Two](#)] that he told Annette Smith that closing the Baxter Art Gallery was the stupidest thing he ever did, you said you weren't sure you agreed that it was the stupidest.

GREETHER: [Laughter] He was sort of a nice guy. Goldberger was the president when I became division chair, and then he was replaced by [Thomas E.] Everhart [Caltech president, 1987–1997; professor of electrical engineering and applied physics, emeritus] and then when I was called back in 2006 or whenever it was —

ASPATURIAN: That's right, 2006.

GREETHER: [Jean-Lou] Chameau [Caltech president, 2006–13] was in his first year, and those are three very different personalities.

ASPATURIAN: Do you want to talk about the three of them a bit since we're there?

GRETHER: I would say that Goldberger, he's kind of a flake.

ASPATURIAN: [Laughter]

GRETHER: I mean, you go to the trustee retreat, or whatever they call it—and you spend the evening talking to the trustees about unilateral nuclear disarmament!?! This is not a group—I mean, why would you do that?

ASPATURIAN: I understand. Wrong audience.

GRETHER: Also, Everhart, for example, is not a sarcastic individual. He's very sincere. I believe that he honestly gave it his best shot. Everhart would never have referred to the student body collectively as “the little bastards,” which is what Goldberger did. Nor would he say, “What am I supposed to talk about? Oh, it doesn't matter; I can bullshit about anything for thirty minutes.” That's the kind of thing I've heard Goldberger say. You would never hear that from Tom. I think Tom was more thoughtful, and I think he was a much more valuable ally for the division, even though he himself is not any more a humanist than Murph was. Murph was very interested in philosophy, but I don't know that he cared much for anything else. I guess it is pretty clear from what I'm saying that I actually had a lot more respect for Everhart.

Now Chameau—I didn't know he was going to wander off to Saudi Arabia, but he did. He was also, it seemed to me, quite dedicated to the job—until he quit, of course—in the sense that he was very concerned about our fundraising, and the broadness—or the lack of it—in the base that we're addressing. He was taking steps and setting things in motion to try to change that to the extent that I would not have wanted to be chairman under him, because the division chairs would have had to spend an enormous amount of time getting to know trustee types and that sort of thing; and I just don't have the right protective coloration for that kind of activity. Jonathan Katz, who came in after me [in 2007] sort of liked that kind of thing; he's good at it, and that was fine. But actually I was quite impressed with Chameau in that first year while I was interim chair. I would definitely put Everhart up there too.

Caltech provosts B. Kamb & P. Jennings

I didn't know Harold Brown enough to deal with him. He was still president while I was there, but at that time in my life, I wasn't paying much attention to presidents. I worked directly with the three of them, and I worked with four provosts: Roberts, Vogt, Kamb, and Jennings.

ASPATURIAN: You talked about Paul Jennings a little last time.

GRETHER: He was head and shoulders above the others. I did have my problems with Kamb.

ASPATURIAN: Which were?

GREETHER: He was exceedingly opinionated and refused to listen to anything. Also, his instincts about organizations were not good at all.

ASPATURIAN: It sounds like he was not a natural administrator.

GREETHER: Oh, no.

ASPATURIAN: Although he had been chairman of geoplanetary [Division of Geological and Planetary Sciences].

GREETHER: He'd been head for a long time. I remember when we were discussing something that I think Ron Bush wanted—I don't remember what it was. We talked about it, and Barclay said, "I don't think this was a good idea." I went back and relayed this to Ron, so Bush went to Kamb and complained to him, and Kamb said, "Well, okay." I said to Barclay, "You know, you make me a non-chairman if you continue to do this. If I bring something to you and you say no, and then the person brings it to you again, and you say yes, they'll learn that there's no point in dealing with me. They'll just go straight to you; you can just be the division chair if you want." I remember him saying, "Yes, I hear you, I know; but I think my job is to solve problems." He didn't have any good sense about how organizations worked in that sense.

He was the only provost who ever accused me of being unfair. One day he said to me, "Look, I think you're not fair to the

humanists.” I said, “I’ve tried very hard to be scrupulously fair.” He said, “Well, I’ve been looking at their salaries,” and I said, “Well, there are differences across disciplines, that’s true, but I’ve been very careful. He said,”Just look; I’ve got a list here,” and he handed me a list of the faculty he considered humanists, which included Bob [Robert] Oliver [professor of economics, emeritus; d. 1998] and Ned [Edwin] Munger [professor of geography, emeritus; d. 2010] and a number of other people who were not humanists. And I said to him, “But these people are not humanists.” And some who were humanists were not on the list. And he said, “You know what I mean by humanists—these are the people I want to support.” So he was very much into that: He knew what was good, and it was the old Caltech that he liked.

ASPATURIAN: Did he allocate money to raise their salaries?

GRETHER: Um-hum.

ASPATURIAN: Okay. He didn’t expect you to come up with that funding.

GRETHER: Well, not directly right then, but later. For example, Bob Oliver became MOSH [master of student houses] at one point. Barclay dealt with the raise in salary, and, as I recall, Bob negotiated a deal where he didn’t have to teach, and so I used to refer to him as our research professor. Barclay would say we don’t have research professors—“Well, we’ve got one that doesn’t teach; what do you call that? I hope you realize, you’ve

got to clean that up,” because Bob quit after a year as MOSH, and, of course, he kept—

ASPATURIAN: He kept the salary?

GRETHER: Of course.

ASPATURIAN: Well.

GRETHER: And Barclay’s next project was to be Ned Munger, and so I said, “I wrote you this long report about the division when you first came on as provost; have you read that?” He said, “No, not really; it sits on the corner of my desk, and I hope that maybe by some sort of mental osmosis it’ll come in.” Barclay was not open-minded about these things. It’s not to say he wasn’t a smart man; he was extremely smart.

ASPATURIAN: So I hear.

GRETHER: But Jennings had much better instincts. I didn’t always agree with him, but that’s fine that we don’t always come down exactly the same on things. He could always explain to you in an intelligent way why he got to where he was. He’d obviously thought through these things. Different personality from Vogt completely.

Mellon Postdoctoral Program in the Humanities

ASPATURIAN: I wanted to ask you about the postdoctoral program in the humanities, which I’ve heard described as a very

successful innovation. Can you talk about how you decided to do that?

GRETHER: Well, first of all, we got money for that.

ASPATURIAN: From the various foundations?

GRETHER: Initially the Mellon Foundation gave us some money, but then later on we managed to raise more from other sources. [Caltech trustee] Wally [Walter] Weisman, I think, gave us some money for the postdoc program and various things like that. We call them postdocs, but they're postdocs only in the sense they have PhDs. They're not postdocs in the sense that they work for anybody else. They're usually associated with somebody—there's some sort of mentoring—but they come and they get research support. They have a light teaching load—two classes a year.

ASPATURIAN: What was the appointment, two years, three years?

GRETHER: It's a two-year appointment, and sometimes people have been extended for a third year. They're appointed as instructors, and I think we talked about this last time—how you can be an instructor for three years. It's been successful in the sense that they come and they teach their classes and they do generally well. They get research support of a sort that they probably won't get when they get a real job, and that's very helpful for them because it means they get a chance to get their

first book out or that kind of thing. By and large, at least initially—I really haven't been paying much attention more recently—they were successful in the sense that they would go out and get decent jobs, which is not easy to do in those fields.

ASPATURIAN: No, it is not.

GREThER: And so that experience was helpful. They can point to the fact that they have teaching experience and probably some teaching reviews and that kind of stuff, but they've also had two years of a light teaching load and a chance to get research work done. That seems to be a good recipe for giving people in the humanities fields an advantage in the job market. We've had people in history, English, philosophy—the major disciplines that we do. I think John Brewer brought in somebody in art history.

ASPATURIAN: I see. So you had a lot of latitude in who you recruited for these positions.

GREThER: The humanities faculty managed that program, and the idea was not to let one group monopolize it or anything like that. These things were common resources, if you like. If somebody wanted to endow a fellowship in history, for example, which they could do, that means the historians would get that support, but if they have that one dedicated to them—

ASPATURIAN: Another slot might go to someone else.

GRETHER: Free it up a little bit. That was done on a cooperative basis. I think it was appreciated by both the postdocs and the faculty.

ASPATURIAN: I'm sure.

Obstacles to graduate program in humanities

GRETHER: A graduate program in the humanities here would be a very hard thing to run, because first of all there's the limited number of faculty, although maybe if you did something in conjunction with the Huntington Library, it would be possible. The other problem is the Caltech library system. We simply do not have a good library, and library resources are very important in the humanities. I will give you an example. My youngest grandson is a freshman at Harvard. You have to take a freshman seminar, and so he signed up for one on the Silk Road. But not enough people signed up, so his second choice was global crime fiction. The focus is on contemporary *noir* novels, each one from a different country. I got the reading list, and it looked kind of interesting—I like that kind of thing. Along with each book, there was always one outside reading, from a literary journal or a book of essays or something, and of those articles, filling twelve or thirteen weeks, I could only obtain one from Millikan [Library; since 2021 Caltech Hall]. And so that tells you. He sends me the PDFs to read. [Laughter]

ASPATURIAN: Was a postdoctoral program in the humanities started here partly in response to the humanities faculty wanting to begin a graduate program?

GRETHER: Did they want a graduate program? I think some of them did, yes. And this is a substitute for that. I think many of them realized that the library facilities were such that such a program wouldn't work. The other problem in running a graduate program is that you have to hire people who fit it. And that's the focus—which they don't have. And to a considerable extent resisted.

ASPATURIAN: Which you've talked about. They did not want to do that. [See Session [Two](#)]

GRETHER: So it would be a problem.

Challenges of HSS fundraising

ASPATURIAN: In terms of things like Institute resources and named professorships and Development fundraising on your behalf, how well do you think HSS fared during your years as division chair?

GRETHER: Oh, very badly. It's much better now. I think Everhart and Chameau, and Baltimore also, were more supportive than Goldberger. Goldberger was reluctant to let us deal with anybody who might give money elsewhere. There's a trustee for example—a chemical engineer—who gave a lot of money to

Stanford economics, and he was off limits. And in fact if you look at the roster at the time, I think we had two or maybe three endowed chairs in the division; there are more now—

ASPATURIAN: Do you recall who they were offhand?

GREETHER: Lance Davis had a chair, which was split in two, and Charlie Plott got half. In the humanities you had a chair that was held by Alan Donagan [Dreyfuss Professor of Philosophy; d. 1991]; someone had it before him. There was a big chair that Jerry McGann got. That funding had been raised, I think, by Huttenback, and it may have been the only one in the humanities at the time. Now there are more.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, quite a few actually.

GREETHER: That's a new arrangement. I remember Tanya Mink in Development saying, "You just can't raise money for law. People won't support it." I said, "Well, law schools do. A lot of money goes to that." What I think it meant in general was that Development knew how to raise money for certain kinds of things, and they had contacts in companies with certain kinds of people, and those were not the kind of people who would be good for giving money for humanities and social sciences, and they didn't want to bother.

ASPATURIAN: Did you see that changing at all toward the end of your tenure once Everhart, as you say, came in?

GREETHER: I think so. It got better. But I think that originally it was a great concern that Development would only turn to HSS after they failed in trying to get donor money for something else

ASPATURIAN: That must have been very frustrating for you and for your executive officers.

GREETHER: Oh, it was, yes, but over time, it's changed. There is a big change that has happened. I don't think Chameau cared a whit about humanities, but he perceived that certain areas in humanities and social sciences would be good sources for raising money. That had always been the case with business economics, as it was then called. Goldberger I often viewed as somehow threatening to bring us a chair in something that wasn't necessarily what we wanted to do.

"If I had to do it again, I don't know"

ASPATURIAN: I have one more question for the session. Looking back on your years as division chair, if you could rewind the reel, what would you have done differently?

GREETHER: I wouldn't have taken the job in the first place. It was a very time-consuming job. It may be less so now, I hope, unless the fundraising takes forever. We had a lot of conflict early on. Not so much internally, although some of that, but it was more with the outside world brought on by the hiring freeze and Vogt and all this kind of stuff. I did the best I could with it; I

think we made a lot of progress. But if I had to do it again, I don't know.

ASPATURIAN: Shall we end today on that note?

GREETHER: Sure.

SESSION 4, FEBRUARY 15, 2018

Makes difficult decision to sign on for 2nd HSS term:
“Circumstances had changed”

ASPATURIAN: I wanted to begin by going back to something you said last time, just as we ended the session. I asked what you might have done differently, looking back, and you said, kind of jokingly, that you wouldn't have taken the job. But you did sign on for a second five years, and I wondered why that was, under the circumstances.

GREETHER: Well, let me defer on that for a second.

ASPATURIAN: Okay.

GREETHER: While my memory of these conversations is admittedly somewhat imperfect, I think that last time a lot of what we talked about were problems or stresses that I had, which came largely as a result of Robbie Vogt basically saying, “No more new positions.” And, I think I was clear that in some sense, this

couldn't have come at a worse time for this group in that we were partway through, or at the beginning of, periods where we required growth in several areas. English, philosophy, languages—all those areas covered by lecturers—and in the social sciences, where we were losing lots of people. So there were lots of things that were in process, if you like. When new appointments got cut off, it's not just that these positions didn't happen, but that people had had expectations or promises that they would happen. And one of the rules of good administration is that you never raise somebody's expectations and then lower them, because they're worse off when that happens. And that's part of what caused the trouble. We can't speculate too much about counterfactuals, but had Goldberger been successful, for example, in his effort to make Roger Noll provost, a whole lot of this would have been different.

And whether things would have been different had he gone straight to Vogt as provost, I don't know. Robbie Vogt always impressed me as an honest person, and so my guess is that he probably might have made the same general policy moves, although he might have done it a little more delicately [laughter] than he did. Now to get to your question a little bit, by the time my first term was up, I'd already been chair for five years.

ASPATURIAN: Right.

GRETHER: And had, not so much invested, but it took a lot of time. This is not a stress-free existence I was in.

ASPATURIAN: It doesn't sound like it.

GRETHER: So under Robbie Vogt, it was time to come up for renewal or not, and while in some sense I probably egotistically wanted to be reappointed, I probably would have preferred not to stay for another five years. In fact, I would say that, in general, seven years is about right. The last two or three years of a ten-year term, you get tired of it, and I found I had to fight the instinct, or tendency, to say, "If I just do this by myself, it'll be so much easier rather than go through all these processes." The thing is, the process part of it is very important. The faculty participation and all this.

ASPATURIAN: The buy-in and everything.

GRETHER: Yes. Just saying "the chair is gonna do it" is probably a bad idea. We also had enough other things going on at the time that I decided, "Well, I'll stay on, at least for a while." And then, in fact, Robbie gets fired as provost before I get reappointed. Barclay [Kamb] comes in and then it starts the whole thing all over again. So there was quite a period there where we didn't know what was going to happen. That doesn't exactly answer your question.

ASPATURIAN: To some degree it does. You felt continuity and your experience were important.

GRETHER: Part of it was that my circumstances had also changed in the sense that I had devoted five years to this and so the

things that had made me want to not become chair were now, in some sense, five years past, and I was thinking about other things.

ASPATURIAN: Sure.

Multiyear search for new literature prof leads to hiring of C. Weinstein

GREETHER: Last time we started talking about some of the appointments that were made, and maybe a couple of them I could talk about. One would be Weinstein.

ASPATURIAN: Cindy Weinstein.

GREETHER: Yes. The group in English for some reason or other had a strong preference for senior appointments. By the time all this happened, Jerry McGann had left. I think Ron Bush wanted senior appointments and—I don't know, they all seemed to want to do that. Caltech as an institution typically has a preference for junior appointments; they prefer to bring in junior people, treat them well, and let them become famous, rather than do it the other way around, bringing in senior people. So the general rule was that unless you were authorized specifically to make a senior appointment because you're going into some brand-new area or something like that, bringing in a senior person required that they had to be some kind of off-scale superstar—a target-of-opportunity kind of thing. It wasn't enough to say they're good enough; there had to be some

reason why *now this person*. And so the provost—I don't remember if it was Vogt or Kamb—authorized a junior position search, and they came in with a senior appointment.

ASPATURIAN: This was in literature, specifically?

GRETHER: This is specifically literature. And the argument was that this was a target of opportunity. There was some crisis in the man's life—I've forgotten his name now—and he was at CUNY, and for some reason or other he was going to leave, and so this was a golden opportunity. For whatever reason, that didn't work out. I wasn't persuaded it was such a golden opportunity but persuading me wasn't the problem: He decided not to do it or whatever, so that didn't happen.

The following year, again, the English group was authorized a junior appointment, and they came up with a set of four or five candidates. All of whom were women, and I think it's fair to say *this was the most superannuated set of junior candidates you've ever seen*. We had one woman who was actually a tenured professor at Rutgers, who claimed she would come as assistant professor. It would have been lawsuit city if we started doing something like that. Another one had gone full-term—like seven years—at Columbia or Stanford, but was now nearing the end of a term as assistant professor at a second university. That would have been a hard sell.

ASPATURIAN: At a place like this, yes.

GRETHER: To come in and say, after fourteen years as an assistant professor, this is a rising star. The woman they eventually settled on was an assistant professor at Princeton. So we offered her a job, and she agreed to that and the administration agreed, but then she said, "I won't come unless you give me tenure." Which, frankly, was not a crazy thing for her to do. Princeton is a good place to be from: Why would you come here from there to become an assistant professor? In any event, Barclay was the provost at the time, and he was in favor of giving her tenure, but when I asked some of the literature people here, "If you had a tenure appointment, would this be the person you would appoint?" they said, oh, no. And so I said, "Basically, that's what you're doing; we're going through this subterfuge to get a senior appointment, but you would never have made this particular senior appointment." So I went to Barclay, and I said, "This is a bad way to make a senior appointment, and it sends a terrible signal to all these groups; it says, 'Just cheat, and you can get a senior appointment.'"

He was still prepared to go ahead and do that anyway, so I said, "Let me suggest the following: Next year, let's have a junior search again; however, let's change the rules. Let's say it's a junior search, but if you find a suitably qualified woman or member of a minority group—not necessarily a superstar but a qualified person—you can make it a senior appointment. And he thought about that and said he thought that was okay, and I said, "That's what affirmative action is in some sense, saying 'we won't require such a high bar, but you have to be qualified.'"

And so the following fall when we set out to search again, I announced this fact in the humanities faculty. They went nuts. They weren't *all* upset—but there was great outrage. I remember Jenijoy [La Belle] and Morgan Kousser, in particular, were furious. Morgan thinking it was unconstitutional, and Jenijoy saying it discriminated against white males. I said, “No it doesn't. You want a white male— if it's a junior appointment, fine; but if it's going to be a senior white male, he's got to meet the standards we've had before. I'm just saying, you may hire a suitably qualified woman or minority group candidate at the senior level.” And so for the first time—this was the third year now that we'd done this search, and David Smith was actually chair of the committee—in defiance of me, they went out and actually produced junior candidates, one of whom was Cindy Weinstein. So in some sense, they actually said, “We'll show him.”

ASPATURIAN: They finally did what you had wanted them to do.

GRETHER: After all that. And she was fine. She's worked out; she's done well.

ASPATURIAN: I believe her field is American literature.

Humanities faculty revamp Caltech's remedial writing class

GRETHER: Yes. Her thesis was on *The Education of Henry Adams*, I think. Now, roughly about the time we hired her or shortly

thereafter—one of the problems that’s always plagued humanists who teach the freshmen, which is basically everybody, is the quality of writing in the freshman classes. There was a test administered by the ETS [Educational Testing Service], I think, where if you get a certain score, you were admitted into the freshman classes. Otherwise, you had to take some sort of remedial writing or remedial language class for which you got Institute credit, but it didn’t count toward your humanities credits. The humanities group felt that students were getting into these freshman classes who had no business there because they couldn’t write. And so—I think maybe David Smith again was a big mover on this—they organized to give their own test where students would answer some essay questions that were graded by faculty. There was lots of enthusiasm for this, and they got mostly humanities faculty to grade them. I don’t know if they got social science faculty as well; they could have if they chose to. This was fine.

Cindy Weinstein came to me, and we had a conversation about this. She had been asked or offered the opportunity to head that effort, and she talked to me about whether or not this was the proper thing for her to do, and I told her no. I said, “Look, you’re an assistant professor. Your job is to get tenure and get famous and to do that, you should be writing and going to conferences, that kind of thing. Taking this on could be a big administrative load—plus, I’ve seen this kind of thing before: Your colleagues get all fired up to do something, and then they lose interest in it.”

ASPATURIAN: And you're left to do it.

GRETHER: And you're left with it. So I said, "Don't do that." She said okay, and as a matter of fact, she didn't. I never thought anything more about it. I thought I'd given her sensible advice, and then a couple of years later, I was at a conference in Arizona, and one of our former graduate students was giving a talk to a group of young women university students or junior faculty who were attending this conference. The American Economic Association has something called CSWEP—Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession—and she was a member of this committee and talking about what the committee did. She talked about how when she went on the job market after finishing her PhD, her Caltech faculty advisors, who were all men, all advised her not to become a theorist, and "They did that because I was a woman." And she went on to talk about how the division head advised her not to go into this theory business because she was a woman.

And I was thinking, "I can't remember if I advised her or not; I probably did." I knew her pretty well, and I certainly would have advised her not to become a theorist, but that had nothing to do with the fact that she was female. It had to do with the fact that when she came here, she already had a PhD in history with emphasis in demography, and then she picks up all the economic theory and the statistical theory and non-market decision making, and there probably are not more than one or two people in the country or the world who have credentials

like that. Why would you chuck that and go with what a lot of other people who know a lot more mathematics than you do are already doing? I'm sure I would have given her that advice, and I was thinking about whether Cindy thought that's why I told her not to take on that grading project, you know? I would doubt it.

ASPATURIAN: I don't think so.

Political scientist P. Ordeshook; more salary negotiations with provost

GREETHER: But, you never know how people read these things. Another point that we can talk about is the Ordeshook appointment.

ASPATURIAN: Peter Ordeshook.

GREETHER: Peter Ordeshook. Peter was a senior and very distinguished political scientist. He'd been at Carnegie Mellon for quite a while and was at the time at the University of Texas. Texas had troubles, not the least of which at the time was that the price of oil had gone down and there was a housing slump in Texas. To get out, people needed some help. So we were trying to make him an offer. And I think I mentioned last time that one of the things the division chair does is negotiate offers with the provost.

ASPATURIAN: Yes. We talked about that. [See Session [Three](#)]

GRETHER: This again was Barclay, and so, when the faculty voted and the administration approved offering Peter a position, I had to go see Barclay and I had in mind sort of a target figure. So we sit down, and we plow the earth a little bit, and Barclay gives me this binder with all the salaries in it. I looked it over, and he says, "I'm willing to go this high," and he gives me a number—I won't say what it is—which is more or less what I was looking for. I did my best to look disconsolate and disappointed, and he said, "What's wrong?" and I said, "I really was hoping for"—and I shot him a number that was a few thousand dollars more than the one he mentioned, and he looked at me, and said, "How could you possibly have come up with a number like that?" I said, "Well, it's not that far from the number you suggested. But what you suggested was a very round number, and what I suggested makes it look like we know what we're doing," and he said, "Oh, you mean like *scientific management*." And I said, yeah, and he said, "I'll buy that." [Laughter] I remember telling this story to Fred Anson [Gilloon Professor of Chemistry, Emeritus; d. 2024], and he said, "And that worked?" [Laughter] I remember when we had a little reception for Peter's seventieth birthday, and I told that story, Peter said, "I always wondered why I got that particular offer. You're right; it was an odd number." [Laughter]

HSS faculty taking each other's classes "a perfectly natural thing to do"

ASPATURIAN: It impressed the provost and it did the job. I just want to digress for a moment. Morgan Kousser mentioned in our oral history interviews that he took some of your classes.

GRETHER: He may have.

ASPATURIAN: He said he thought he needed more mathematics, so he turned to you.

GRETHER: He wanted statistics, from what I remember.

ASPATURIAN: Yes. He seems to remember pretty clearly.

GRETHER: That was fairly common, for us to take classes from each other. I've done it—Bob Bates, I sat in on his class. Particularly when you have a visitor who will teach a subject that you don't get all the time, you go and sit in on the class.

ASPATURIAN: Do you think that was unique to the social sciences on this campus? I certainly have not heard much about it in other contexts.

GRETHER: I don't know. I wouldn't think so. It seems to me like a perfectly natural thing to do. I mean it's kind of like how when I was teaching, say, advanced graduate courses, I would usually pick a topic that I didn't know much about. In order to teach something, you have to know it a lot better than the

things that you're handing out. On the other hand, if somebody came who was giving a class on something that was new, it wouldn't seem like an unreasonable thing to go and sit in on it. You ask them: Do you mind if I do that? But I wouldn't think that it would be limited to social sciences; I don't know why it would be particularly, unless managing a big lab is such a time sink that you don't have time to do that kind of thing. I don't know.

ASPATURIAN: Maybe there's a more open spirit of interest in what one's colleagues are doing.

GRETHER: It could be. The thing is we don't work in teams, typically, and since we don't each have our team, we mostly work individually or in collaboration with other faculty. In that sense, maybe the scientists' model is that if there's a skill that they need, they go hire somebody with that skill into the lab and get it that way. That's quite possible.

ASPATURIAN: I was interested because I heard it from Morgan, and now I'm hearing it from you and I have not heard this from anybody else I've talked to. They may go to somebody individually and discuss something or engage in a kind of informal tutorial, but taking a class—no.

“Pleased to have John Ledyard as my division chair successor”

So when you were ready to step down, John Ledyard was appointed your successor. How did you feel about that?

GRETHER: I was quite pleased. It's not really accurate to say so-and-so hired so-and-so, in the sense that the chair doesn't really go out unilaterally and recruit people, but I was the chair when John was appointed. I was very supportive of that hire, and I thought he was the kind of person we needed. He had been executive officer [for the social sciences], and that was intentional to raise his profile. Because he was a well-known person outside of Caltech—inside Caltech, who knows? He's a very capable person and so I thought, make him executive officer so he'll get some administrative experience. He was also on a couple of committees, one to do with admissions, and another having to do with electrical engineering. So I was very pleased to have him as my successor.

Reflects on “legacy” & administrative philosophy as HSS chair

ASPATURIAN: I hesitate to put the question this way because I have a feeling you're not someone who generally thinks in terms of “my legacy,” but I was wondering, looking back on your ten years as division chair, what would you see as your

primary legacies? Although that might not be the word you would use.

GREETHER: Well, I think first of all, this institution, like many, doesn't have much of a memory.

ASPATURIAN: That's part of what these oral histories are supposed to help cultivate.

GREETHER: That may be, but I think that one gets forgotten pretty quickly. I think that when I initially said I didn't want to do this, it partially was because one of the first rules you have to think about is, If you believe there's an organization that won't survive without you, then it won't survive. So there's no point in taking on a job like that if you think, "Oh, I'm the only person who could possibly handle this." If you felt that was true, then it would be a waste of time because after you, it's not going to survive. I think it's true that when I got here I thought that we—by which I mean the division—were not viewed as being on the same footing as the rest of the Institute

ASPATURIAN: I see.

GREETHER: Now it's probably always the case that in some sense, we're the tail of the dog rather than the dog. On the other hand, I think that by the time I was done being chairman, they were at least convinced that we played by the same set of rules and in the same game that was going on elsewhere. That's not uniquely due to me certainly.

But that was something where I tried to put us on an equivalence in some sense in terms of standards and expected behavior. Part of that were some things I think I mentioned earlier—the staff salary problem [see Session [Three](#)] and all that kind of thing.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, you insisted on a certain uniformity there.

GRETHER: So part of it is not necessarily particular people. We brought in some people that I was very pleased to be able to bring in, and they did well, but they too, like myself, will be here for a while and then replaced by others and all that kind of thing. I mean, the focus of the social science program is very much changing due to circumstances. Other people learned how to compete with us, so you have to look for different things. Right now they're trying neuroscience and other things.

ASPATURIAN: The neuroeconomics and so on.

GRETHER: How that will work out, only time and the future will tell. Again, I don't know if this is my legacy, but I would say that I was trying to foster some mutual respect within the institution, and I think I did that. But I don't mean to imply that it wasn't there before me.

Introduction of neuroeconomics & expansion of history of science programs

ASPATURIAN: I know what you mean. Mentioning neuroeconomics brings up another interesting question for me, which is what do you think of the directions in which the division has moved under Ledyard, under Jean Ensminger and Jonathan Katz.

GREETHER: The neuroeconomics was not under Ledyard; that began under Jean Ensminger.

ASPATURIAN: There was also quite a substantial build-up in the history of science, which I think started when you brought in Diana [Kormos–Buchwald].

GREETHER: Yes.

ASPATURIAN: Of course you had Kevles already. But he left eventually.

GREETHER: Yes, he left later on. There was a build-up in the history of science, but again, this is way outside my field, and only part of it occurred while I was chair. The big change, which I guess in some sense happened under John, was that where Dan is more interested in the social history of science and science's interactions with other things, I'm less sure that Diana's interests go that way, and certainly I don't think that's the way I would characterize [Jed Z.] Buchwald [Dreyfus Pro-

fessor of History]. I think he's interested in the sort of hard-core history of science.

And so that's kind of a shift. What do I think of it? I don't have an intellectual opinion of it. I don't find it as interesting to me, personally, but that's because I'm interested in more social things. But that's not to criticize it; it's just the way it worked out.

Grether's ongoing research interests

ASPATURIAN: What research did you personally return to after you stepped down? I assume you'd been doing some while you were division chair, but it must have been—

GREETHER: Well, probably because my own style has been much more to do it myself or with someone else, but not with a group, there was no group marching forward while I was being chairman. I managed to get some things out involving individual decision-making experiments. I guess the last publication I had to do with, about a year or two ago, came out in the journal *Microeconomics*, and it had to do with on-line automobile auctions. So I've done things of that sort. Things that involve both individual decision-making and markets and a lot of experimental stuff—that's what I was interested in. I was just at a conference, February 2nd and 3rd, and was surprised that a lot of the work I did originally back in the late '70s was still in some

sense being referenced, because I was one of the first people who started doing that.

So I've stayed in that general domain, if you like. And actually about twenty years ago, we did do something that might be called like neuroeconomics. That was a joint project with myself, Plott, John Allman [Hixon Professor of Neurobiology], and a guy named Marty [Martin] Sereno, UC San Diego.

ASPATURIAN: That's not a name I recognize. John Allman, yes.

GREETHER: Sereno was on the UC San Diego faculty, and there's a hospital on the campus that had a scanner that could be used for research purposes one day a week, and he was the entrée to that. And we rented that. It proved to be actually a kind of disaster, because apparently people weren't using it down there—but after we started using it, having these “outsiders” coming in and using it scared them, so they booked it all up. It got to where we could only operate on Sundays, and it was just horrible because you can't get subjects then, and it's a mess. We had, I thought, a perfectly sensible question that we wanted to explore.

ASPATURIAN: Which was?

GREETHER: Basically the question was, what happens if I give you a class of problems that you're not familiar with, and you're trying to figure out what to do. At some point, you may figure it out or I may tell you a solution—here's how you do it—and

then give you some more problems. All the time, we're looking at what's going on in your head. The question is, Can you see the difference?

ASPATURIAN: Interesting. The first is more looking at creativity—creative thinking, I would say—and the second perhaps more at learning, specifically.

GREETHER: Learning, and then once learned, can you tell—most economic theory is sort of theory about equilibrium. What we wanted to know was, Could you tell the difference between someone who is at equilibrium versus someone who is searching for a solution?

ASPATURIAN: And what did you find?

GREETHER: Well, biologists seem to believe that you could do that. But, remember, this was twenty years ago, and the technology was a little primitive. You could see differences, but I wasn't persuaded that we really got that far. You could probably do a lot better now. But one of the things that motivated me is that there are a lot of reported behaviors that are quite contrary to the standard economic models. The usual examples concern people who are solving unfamiliar problems.

ASPATURIAN: Do you mean behaviors that have been observed experimentally and are being reported on, or also anecdotally?

GREETHER: Experimentally or in the real world.

ASPATURIAN: So, anecdotal, as well.

GREETHER: Anecdotal, as well. The question is, could you tell if these things were equilibrium behaviors or not. I was curious. Anyhow that was twenty years ago.

ASPATURIAN: Is that a focus of current neuroeconomics research here in the division? Is anyone looking at that now?

GREETHER: I have no idea. They're looking at lots of things.



David and Susan Grether, early 2000s. *Photo courtesy of Susan Grether*

Returns to HSS as interim division chair, 2006–07

ASPATURIAN: Yes, so I gather. I believe it was in 2006 that you stepped back up as interim division chair?

GREETHER: Yes.

ASPATURIAN: What were the circumstances surrounding that?

GREETHER: What happened was that Jean Ensminger was chair for four years and then stepped down. The division needed to get somebody else, and after some process they ended up with Peter Bossaerts, who was on sabbatical or something like that. So they wanted somebody to come in and either share the job or do it with him. For that to be feasible, it was simpler to have someone who had already been a division chair. For a couple of reasons, not the least of which is access to files and salary information and all that kind of stuff that people worry about. Jean had just stepped down, so it would have been an odd thing to expect her to do it. [Laughter] She quit to go do whatever she was doing, and presumably, that didn't include being part-time division chair, and so I suppose John and I would be the two obvious people. I'd been out of the office a longer time, and people had probably forgotten about me. Also the person who was the provost at that time was Paul Jennings. I'd worked with him, and he asked if I would do it, and I said okay. That was Chameau's first year as president. None of the people I'd see, except for Jennings, had overlapped with me before. It'd been fourteen years since I'd been chair, so it was a completely new cast of characters.

ASPATURIAN: You and Jennings had worked together before, and you both stepped back up to the plate.

GREETHER: Yes. That was a fine experience also. I got the impression that things were fine in terms of how the administration viewed the division. I didn't detect any problems.

ASPATURIAN: When it turned out that Dr. Bossaerts wasn't coming back, were you involved at all in choosing Jonathan Katz?

GREETHER: Well, splitting a job like that turns out to be not a very good idea. Particularly if one person doesn't really want to be bothered, and he's the one with the authority. It mattered a lot for things like recruitment if somebody would talk to Peter, and Peter would tell them one thing, and then they would talk to me, and Peter didn't agree with what I told them—it's a very bad way to try to hire somebody.

ASPATURIAN: Right. You can't have that kind of inconsistency at the top.

GREETHER: It's worse, because it highlights the importance of the chair, and at a time when you don't know who the chair is going to be, you don't want to be doing that.

So Peter then eventually goes out: At some point, he decided he wasn't going to come back and agreed to essentially resign, and I became the interim chair for a short period of time. And I believe there was a search committee, which as acting division chair I certainly was not a member of, so I was not involved directly in that process. Now it wasn't as though I didn't know what was going on, but I was not a member of the committee or in any official capacity involved in that. And then Katz took over and did it for something like seven years.

ASPATURIAN: Didn't he do it for all ten?

GREETHER: No.

ASPATURIAN: Maybe it was eight. [It was seven. *-Ed.*]

GREETHER: Whatever it was. As I said, earlier, and as I said to him, too, I think that seven years makes more sense.

ASPATURIAN: I imagine a lot of people who have been division chairs would agree with you.

GREETHER: Probably, because the dictatorial urge becomes harder to resist if you've been doing it for seven or eight years, and you start thinking like, "I know how this is going to come out, so why not just go there?" And that's not a healthy way to run an academic organization.

ASPATURIAN: I think you're right. Anything else you'd like to put into the record?

GREETHER: Probably, although I haven't thought about exactly what it is. I don't know what sort of impression I've given.

ASPATURIAN: A good one. I've been listening to the tapes.

GREETHER: That makes me nervous. I have to think about that. Maybe if I go through the thing, I'll be able to come up with more.

Involvement in insurance & annuities & early faculty retirement committees

ASPATURIAN: Sure. Work on any Caltech administrative committees that comes to mind?

GREThER: Well, let's see, the first one was something called the benefits committee.

It was called the IAC—Insurance and Annuity Committee—when I first was put onto it. I went onto it because Bob Huttenback, who was the division chair at the time, asked me to. I was on it for about forty years, maybe even more than that, because it was just this last year that I was booted off the committee. The head of HR [Caltech Human Resources] said the president insisted upon it. The president and I never met each other, so it seems unlikely. But I was on that committee for a long time, and there actually was a very interesting—well, maybe not interesting but substantial—change over the years in the way it was run. It was run initially by a guy by the name of Larry Thompson.

ASPATURIAN: That name is familiar.

GREThER: And the chair of the committee was a guy who ran the Caltech Industrial Relations Center. Chain smoker.

ASPATURIAN: Must have made for some healthy meetings.

GRETHER: I think Larry Thompson was too. In any event, in those days it was a very top-down operation. Dave [David W.] Morrisroe [vice president for business and finance, 1969–1995; d. 2002] was the head of that thing. Paul Jennings was on that committee at some point with me too. I remember that Larry Thompson used to hand out a sheet of paper with data on it—insurance rates or current health care benefits or something of that sort—and then we would all talk about that. Then they would gather up that sheet of paper and pass out a second one, and so throughout the whole thing, it was never possible, unless you were taking notes quickly, to cross-reference anything. It was clear that this was intentional.

ASPATURIAN: Of course.

GRETHER: Finally we got to the point where they would send out the documents to us a day or two in advance of the meeting, so that everybody could have them and look through them. The degree of openness changed greatly when Tom [Thomas W.] Schmitt became the head of HR.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, he was quite a breath of fresh air.

GRETHER: Yes. You could really see the way the whole operation changed. That was probably the longest-standing committee I was on. There was also a committee, run by Bob [Robert F.] Bacher [professor of physics, emeritus; Caltech provost 1962–70; d. 2004], believe it or not, on early retirement. I served on

that for a while. It was an ad hoc committee set up to come up with policies.

ASPATURIAN: And incentives, I imagine.

GREETHER: Yes. They have them now, but they're all incentives not to retire rather than to retire

ASPATURIAN: I see, I see.

Introduces new metrics as head of freshman admissions committee; encounters some pushback

GREETHER: We don't have to go into that, that's off the track; but in fact the current system is one that would make one not want to retire. I was also on the freshman admissions committee for several years. I was actually head of it for a couple of years. That was kind of interesting.

ASPATURIAN: Do you remember when, the time frame roughly?

GREETHER: Not exactly. Charlene Liebau was the director of admissions.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, okay, I can go from that to figure it out. [It was 1996–1999. –*Ed.*]

GREETHER: I mustn't say on tape that I can't remember the guy's name. I think he's in applied physics or applied math. He's kind of like a bear. It's not going to be good on this tape.

ASPATURIAN: Paul Bellan [professor of applied physics]?

GREETHER: Yeah.

ASPATURIAN: Hey!

GREETHER: [Laughter] He was the head of the committee when I came on it. They instituted term limits, and he went off, and I became the head of it for a while. And that was kind of interesting. It was a very inefficient process, and it changed enormously. When I first got here, faculty interviewed all applicants.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, they flew out all over the country.

GREETHER: And they were probably the most unrepresentative group of the faculty that you could imagine.

ASPATURIAN: Really?

GREETHER: Mainly humanities faculty.

ASPATURIAN: I did not know that.

GREETHER: Quite a few of them were. By the time I was involved, the number of applicants was exploding; it had been like 800 or 900, and now it was several thousand as they tried to increase the number of applicants. So it wasn't feasible to interview everybody. They had a fairly time-consuming procedure where we would go through all these applications. Because it was so burdensome, it was hard to get faculty to serve on the committee, unless they had endless amounts of time on their hands.

And so one of the things that was instituted—that I put through—was that the admission staff grades applicants from 1 to 10. Essentially 1 through 4 or 5 are dead on arrival, and 9 and 10 are guaranteed in, so I said, “Why don’t we discuss 6 through 8?”

ASPATURIAN: Makes sense.

GREETHER: And they didn’t like that at all. They didn’t like that at all.

ASPATURIAN: When you say, “they,” do you mean the professional admissions people or the admissions committee?

GREETHER: The committee members. The admissions people would prefer to have me and faculty butt out. Completely.

ASPATURIAN: Got it.

GREETHER: So I said, “Why can’t we just make the 1 through 5 rankings available in boxes, where anybody who wants to can go through them, and if you find a jewel that got misclassified, put it up and we’ll talk about it at one of the regular meetings.” No one ever did. Not to my knowledge, that is.

So far as the 9s and 10s go, the committee said, “They’re fun; we want to go through those.” I said, “Since we’re going to admit them all, why don’t we just wait and go through them for the awards rather than go through them twice.” Because first you go through the admissions process, and then you go through

the admits to see which ones should get the awards. That was one thing I introduced—it's probably farther streamlined now, I'm sure. One of the things that puzzled me was that none of this was computerized, and I know that other admissions offices at that time kept files containing letters from teachers, for example, who they heard from over time. I know that because my wife taught AP biology for a number of years at Polytechnic School, and she was always writing letters and she knew from talking with people at various admissions offices that they kept her letters on file.

ASPATURIAN: I see.

GRETHER: You want to know whether or not the student of the century comes through every year from this person's recommendation or not. So it helps to analyze that. The admissions people here never did that, and I didn't understand why. They said, "Well, we get people from all over." I said, "Yes, you do, but you always get people from the Thomas Jefferson School of Science. TAMS [Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science] in Texas, University High in Irvine—every year you'll get some of these. And it's probably pretty much the same set of people making the recommendations, so wouldn't you like to know if these people have a good track record?" And they may often make comparisons to other students they've recommended for Caltech, which creates another problem because you have students on the committee who read these letters. It's not clear to me that that's a great idea because they're often finding out

about classmates. In any event, I suspect by now that they do keep files on teachers making recommendations. I hope they do. Certainly they automate it more.

ASPATURIAN: I think it's a more professionally driven operation at this point.

GREETHER: Yeah. But it was interesting back then. They've made it a little more efficient, I think.

Service on undergraduate academic standards & honors (UASH) committee

I was also on UASH [Undergraduate Academic Standards and Honors committee]. I sort of enjoyed that. I got removed from that just a couple years ago; I think it was just because they figured I didn't want to do it, but I actually didn't mind it. But the big innovation there, I think, was Fiona Cowie's.

ASPATURIAN: She's a philosophy professor. [Professor Cowie died in December 2018, about a year after the completion of these interviews. —Ed.]

GREETHER: She's a philosophy professor. I was told—this was before I got on the committee—that one of the reasons UASH was such a time-sink was that students could bring their complaints about grades, or some treatment they got from the dean, or whatever the issue was, directly to the committee. And I was told that Fiona got them to change the rules so that if you

wanted to appear before the committee, you had to first turn in something in writing. You couldn't just show up and bullshit about something.

ASPATURIAN: You have to document.

GRETHER: You have to document it. And that reduced the number of complaints enormously. It also meant that you knew which complaints were coming.

So UASH was actually quite an interesting experience. It seemed to function pretty well; people took it very seriously. I also did a lot of committee work internally, within the division, before I was division chair. I've probably forgotten some other committee things I did with the Institute at large. I never put all that stuff on my CV, so I can't go look there. Nowadays, you do. It seems to be required.

I think there are things I've forgotten about or suppressed, probably, but you probably don't need a real-time tenure. So I think we're probably done, more or less.

ASPATURIAN: I think so.

GRETHER: It's not been too bad. I do tend to get tired by the end of these things.

ASPATURIAN: You're not alone. This has been very enjoyable. Thank you very much.

GREYER: Thank you.