

Grant MacEwan Community College Oral History Project

Interviewee: Alan Vladicka

Interviewer: Valla McLean

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VM: This is an interview for the Grant MacEwan community college oral history project on February 26th, 2019, with Alan Vladicka in Edmonton, Alberta. This is Valla McLean, University Archivist. The first question I'll ask is, what year did you come to Grant MacEwan Community College, and what made you decide to work at the community college?

AV: I came to the college in the fall of 1985. I had been working for several years before that at Alberta Advanced Education and had kind of got to the point where it didn't seem like there were any more opportunities to move. I was working for one of the assistant deputy ministers in what was called Program Services dealing with applications primarily from institutions for new programming and reviewing, approving or not approving those what have you. I probably wouldn't have been as impatient if I'd been a little older, but you know in your early career you sort of want to move and an opportunity came up to work with the executive of MacEwan. The position was called college executive assistant, but it was really executive assistant to the president. I don't think he wanted it to sound like it was just to him, so it was supposed to be the entire college executive, but it wasn't [laughter]. I remember when I came feeling like I'll give this place four or five years, and you know and then probably move on, but there was always something new and different to do, and so I ended up staying for twenty-eight.

VM: You've had various job titles over that time. If you could just talk a bit about how your roles and responsibilities -

AV: Sure, I started out as college executive assistant, as I said. Most of that was - I didn't take minutes at meetings so much, but I was kind of the senior staff person at executive meetings to do follow up and whatever. As I got more and more involved in it, I started to assume - there was nobody doing strategic planning for the institution at the time or what is usually called institutional research, so - I've had various titles, but it was all an evolution. I never applied for another job. I just got moved into things. I started to assume some kind of role in planning and research. I was the author of the college's strategic plan for twenty-five years or so out of that time. At a certain point, about three years in the president actually assigned me - part of my role was split between this executive assistant role and what they called at that time coordinator of institutional research and planning. I then took that job full-time and became director of institutional research and planning and then executive director. The role expanded, and I ended up with seven or eight staff. I never applied for another job. It just evolved and changed and grew. I guess I created the position because it didn't exist before me. It was just an evolutionary process, but all in the area of you know - I guess two sides one was the research side where it was things like the student satisfaction surveys, grad surveys, environmental scanning to inform planning and then the whole process around developing, writing and seeing through the approval stages of the college's strategic plan and other sorts of planning documents - e.g., facilities plans, enrollment plans, etcetera.

VM: Who were some important faculty or administrators during those early days when you started at the community college. Who is the president?

AV: Gerry Kelly was president when I came. One just sort of odd story - I had known him as I knew all of the college presidents from when I was working at Advanced Education. I had a lot of interaction with the senior administration of all the institutions. A fellow by the name of Dennis Larratt was the HR [Human Resources] director at the time. He was the HR person sitting in on the interview - the president, me, and Dennis. I came in and said hi Gerry and held out my hand. Dennis looked at me like, "you're that informal?" Well yeah, I've known him for years. He always calls me Alan, and I'm going to call him Gerry, but he was just flabbergasted [laughter]. Part of the reason I applied, I guess, is that I knew the institution. I knew the person. It turned out that Gerry was a little more difficult. People are different to work with and to work for. Gerry was more difficult to work for [laughter] than he was to work with. But anyway, Gerry was, of course, a major influence on my career for years. He did give me opportunities, but there was also a point, and I guess I can say this even if he sees this. I remember one of the other vice-presidents said to me, Alan, you're probably going to have to move on because I don't think Gerry is ever going to see you as anything but an executive assistant. His view of you isn't going to allow you to advance in the way that you should. I thought about that, and about a year later, Gerry decided to leave. At that point, a number of other opportunities opened up for advancement that - this fellow's name was, oh for heaven's sake now - Barry Snowden and I remember thinking that Barry was probably right. Still, I hesitated long enough that it worked out.

VM: Yes, and who comes after Gerry?

AV: There was an acting presidency for a year by a fellow by the name of Harry Davis, whom you may remember. Harry had been hired - another name that comes from that time Chuck Day or Charles Day was the vice president -academic. He and I had a really good relationship as well; he was very supportive as far as just dealing with the president. I remember a couple of times him saying you know Alan I could see that the way Gerry treated you in that meeting really bothered you. Don't take it personally; he treats all of us that way. Those kinds of things helped because you sort of feel I must be the dumbest person in the world the way he talked to me, and he says that's just the way Gerry talks to people who work for him, so don't take it personally. Harry had been hired with the expectation that he was going to be the next VP academic. It didn't work out that way Gerry hired Sherry Rainsforth instead for reasons that - well, people have their reasons, but anyway, Harry was kept on in a different role. He was acting president for a year during the search that resulted in Paul Byrne being hired. Harry was - I was pleased to see him because he gave me some opportunities to grow in the role, but he also - I mean, this sounds very selfish. Still, he recognized my role with some pretty significant salary increase and whatever [laughter]. It was kind of like, you're doing way more than you're getting paid for which Gerry would never have seen - sort of hired you at this level and you get your increments, but you know where else? So, there was a year with Harry Davis, and then Paul Byrne was hired. Of course, he was there I can't remember the exact year that he went you would probably know from your interviews and whatnot. Still, if we're talking only about the time that it was a community college, then Paul was there for the entire rest of that time because the transition to the university began with him.

VM: Were you at various campuses?

AV: Yes. I started out at what we then called JP campus [Jasper Place], which was later the Centre for the Arts. I moved down to the Seventh Street Plaza when we had that and was there for a couple of years then moved to City Centre, but then for the last five years of my career, I was out at Mill Woods. It was two things - one is they wanted an executive officer out there, there were a couple of deans or associate deans, but the feeling was we need someone senior to be kind of, they sometimes used the term campus principal. It was never an official title, but sort of, you know we should have at least one member of the executive team at Mill Woods. It was also we need to put some things out there; the campus is hardly full, and the City Centre is getting fuller. Your department doesn't really have to be here. It felt a bit like exile [laughter]. In the sense that I must have driven from there to City Centre four days a week for meetings and nobody ever came the other way so you know maybe I should be where almost all of my meetings are. I was at four campuses over my career at MacEwan.

VM: What do you remember - does anything stand out about the physical facilities themselves?

AV: One thing I always remember about JP - Centre for the Arts was just what an interesting place it was in terms of you know you would hear music wafting through the halls. You could go down over lunch and watch dance students practicing or whatever. There was feeling to the Arts campus. When I was there, of course, it was Arts and Business and Community Education. It wasn't only Arts which it later became. Still, there was a unique sort of atmosphere there because of the art programs and you know

dance, the art installations that would be around the hallways sometime. I'll never forget this one - the board meeting was out there, and you know Visual Arts can be a little bit weird at times. It was some sort of a set of mobiles that were hanging quite thickly around part of the campus, and I don't know if this was the actual title, but basically, they were flying penises [laughter]. They were penises with wings, and dozens maybe hundreds and some of the board members just thought -these were conservative appointees and whatever and socially conservative as well as politically. I remember the president having to say to them look we can't censor our art students. Artists come up with what they come up with, and we're trying to develop artists not tell them you can only paint landscapes of the Rocky Mountains or whatever. Still, some of the board members were just absolutely horrified - what kind of garbage are you . . . - they didn't like the flying penises at all.

VM: What are some of the - that sounds like a very memorable event - can you think of any others that stand out over the years?

AV: You've probably had this mentioned before, but from the social perspective - I guess I was thinking about this from two perspectives, one is the development of the institution. So some of the things there I remember - you know some of the celebrations were - we got university transfer status and that was a big deal because before that you know it was literally just the community college with no university programming allowed because the U of A was in the same city and it wasn't deemed appropriate. Although the argument we always made was what about Mount Royal? They're in the same city as the University of Calgary, but they have university transfer status, and of course, the history was different because Mount Royal College had been a private institution, a

United Church College which was brought into the public system in the [19]70s. It had existed since the teens [1900s]. MacEwan was created in the [19]70s with clearly a mandate not to do university programming. We always thought that was limiting, and so some of the milestones were when we got the university status or university transfer status. Permit me just a little bit of bragging. Still, I remember the president saying, and this came as a complete surprise to me, there's somebody who really played a major role in this, I thought he was going to say it was Chuck Day and he said the best proposal writer that I know Alan Vladicka. He put together the material that got us this and I thought boy you know that was very nice. There were other people - all I did was pull it together, but it was nice recognition. One of the things I really found myself thinking about when you sent me this was - and other people probably talked about skit night. We were small enough then that a lot of people knew each other from all kinds of different parts of the college but also small enough that something like skit night where people came up with these skits lampooning various aspects of the college that people got the joke because they were all aware of things. I remember one of them where I was - in those days I used to do triathlons, so I often rode my bike to work, and I would go out and do a long cycle over the lunch hour and whatever and come back and shower and whatever. One of the skits was the guy with the bike in the executive meeting and kind of saying what can I do for a Gerry? I didn't find the portrayal particularly flattering [laughter]. Still, skit night was just a real hoot and talking about Joanne Kemp made me think of that because she was a real mover and shaker in skit night and one of the organizers and would come up with themes like "beware the ideas of March" [laughter].

VM: Were these once a year?

AV: Yes, once a year, usually in March. People were just invited to come up with a skit or skits, and I really got kind of got into that. I enjoyed - not so much - I'm never a very good teller of jokes, but I can do good parodies of things. So, I would create skits around parodies of songs, usually either Gilbert and Sullivan or Rodgers and Hammerstein. We had a vice president at that time of student services and international who did a lot of traveling for the international portion. I wrote a skit - I don't know if you're familiar with Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*? So, this was, "and someday it may happen that a junket must be found. I've got a little list I've got a little list" [laughter]. There were a number of years where that was - it was good team building. It really brought people together and gave them something beyond just work. One thing I have to say very positively about Gerry Kelly is - I mean, the president, of course, was always the target, and he took those things very well. I knew people who said they didn't mind but were mad at you for two weeks afterward. Gerry took it very well he didn't mind being the butt of jokes, and I never saw him act as though sort of I'll get you for that one I remember what you implied about me at skit night and I didn't like it much. Sherry Rainsforth, on the other hand, never forgave and never forgot.

VM: Were they a mix of all staff and instructors?

AV: Yes, it could be anyone. It could be faculty, administration, and this was the point that it was small enough that we all knew each other. I mean not everybody, but there was enough commonality that people could watch a skit that was presented by the folks in the library you know Joanne and company would do, and we would all get the jokes.

What happened as the college grew is that it got so big that something that would be lampooned about Arts and Science nobody else would get it because they weren't familiar with the issues or never had been to that meeting or whatever - what was funny about that? In a way, I guess it's just size. It's easy to bemoan that and say it's too bad we lost that, but I really do think that it's just a function of size. We stopped having college Christmas parties too because it was just too big and so it started being the Arts and Science party, the library party or whatever. Still, there was no college-wide Christmas party that everybody would come out to, and there was a dinner and dance and whatever. It's easy just to say that's too bad that things like that got lost. They didn't get lost they got outgrown. It's just the way.

VM: What campus were you doing these skits at?

AV: They were often performed at Mill Woods. There was a big lecture theatre there that was a good size for that at the time. We would have outgrown it. I think they were usually at Mill Woods maybe at some other - we didn't want it to be so formal that it would be in the Haar Theatre or something because it would be dinner - just pizzas, whatever and then the skits would be performed and hooting, hollering and laughing. It was quite fun.

VM: And you were at Seventh Street Plaza for awhile?

AV: I was.

VM: What did you think of that campus?

AV: It was harder to feel a lot of camaraderie because a vertical building - you're separated, and you only go to the floors you need to go. You don't walk past people on

the way to the cafeteria or whatever you take an elevator and so you might see a few people in the elevator. Still, you don't walk past anybody's office. You don't drop in or whatever. You don't see people in the hallways in the same way. Gerry's vision was that he very much wanted the college to move downtown and he had been pushing for the land that became the city centre campus for years, but before that was successful, he was able to convince the government at least to pay for the lease of this office building. But it wasn't nearly as conducive to an atmosphere of collegiality, if you will, camaraderie, interaction just because of the physical separation. The admin. was on the 14th floor, and although there were days for my triathlon training that I would take the stairs a lot of times, you would come in in the morning, you weren't quite energetic enough to climb fourteen flights of stairs or twenty-eight really so you would go straight up, and you wouldn't see anybody. You might go down to the cafeteria, and the fitness centre were on the same level, so if I was going for a workout or going for lunch, I would go down to level seven and then back up to fourteen. Unless you had a specific meeting - you know what they used to call, there was an acronym for a while MBWA, management by walking around - it didn't come as naturally. You didn't just go for a walk and run into people. You took the elevator ride and ran into one or two people. It wasn't as collegial in a way, but in terms of the college's development, it was a step towards the city centre campus. We were downtown and the next phase after really heavy lobbying, getting the federal government involved and CN [Canadian National] whatever was getting that land.

VM: You were on City Centre Campus as well?

AV: Right from when it was open until 2008. Which is when I was, as I said, exiled or moved to Mill Woods. I moved back to the City Centre campus for about the last six months. There was a decision made at that time to combine my department and what was called Academic Quality Assurance and Accreditation (AQuAA). You might remember Susan May?

VM: Yes.

AV: Susan left, she moved to Advanced Ed. where I had come from, and those two departments were combined. Basically, my last real major task - I was actually asked to stay on longer than I had planned to work on that amalgamation. They were culturally very different departments and trying to make that work, I was, in fact, asked to stay another year and at a certain point, you know as you were saying earlier about retiring at the same time as your partner. My wife had already been retired for a year, and they asked me if I would stay another year, and I said no, and they said how about another six months, and I agreed to that. So, I retired in the fall rather than the spring. I ended up at City Centre campus once again [laughter]. The only campus that we had that I never worked at was Cromdale, the old department store out in the north.

VM: When people moved in, those early days City Centre campus, people came to classes. People were obviously really excited -

AV: They were. It was brand new. I remember our registrar at the time saying that we were getting students who were applying to go to that campus - I don't care what programs are there [laughter]. That doesn't matter. I want to attend City Centre campus; now tell me what's there. Seventh Street Plaza had its strengths and its weaknesses,

but it wasn't, of course, purpose-built to be an educational institution. It was like my god; this was built all for us. This is what we wanted. What was interesting is that we thought at the time this would be all the space we would ever need to the end of time. And within five years, it was full. I don't think we anticipated the growth that would take place because of the space. We obviously had pent up demand that we weren't able to meet in the smaller campuses and restricted space. Once that campus became available, it filled up before we knew it. My god, we would have asked for more space, but we thought this was all we would ever need [laughter]. People were definitely excited about just the opportunity and the nature of the space. The Sport and Wellness Centre, in comparison to you, know the little converted office space that was made into a little gym at Seventh Street Plaza. This seemed like heaven and all the space we would ever need. For a while, there was even a Faculty Club on one of the floors of I guess it would be building six. That was actually something that Gerry had argued against very much. He didn't want a Faculty Club because he didn't want the faculty members to separate themselves from students. If people were going to have lunch, they should all have lunch together in the cafeteria, and faculty and students will blend and mix and intermingle. For a while, there was a Faculty Club, but there wasn't enough demand. I went there a few times for lunch. It was a room that would probably seat 80 people or so, and there would be five, six, ten, twelve people having lunch there because most faculty preferred to go to the cafeteria and mingle. We had enough space at the time that we were looking for ways to use it. They would never be able to allocate that kind space for a Faculty Club now. I can't think of right now what is in that renovated space,

but it's probably offices for fifty people or five classrooms or something. It was huge for the purpose.

VM: Yes. In your opinion, what are the proudest achievements during your career at MacEwan. You talked about the president calling you out -

AV: I think the transition to acquiring university transfer capability and then degree-granting. It's funny, the little memories. That was something that I had worked on with many others. I don't, in any way, claim that I was the lead person on that, but I did a lot of the planning process and the consolidating of documents and the writing of documents and proposals and whatever around that. There is kind of two sides to that because on the one hand - this took place as you know with Paul Byrne as president and I couldn't help but agree with a little bit with Gerry Kelly and his view - and he was always against MacEwan trying to become a university, of course, it happened after he was gone, but his argument or his statement was why does an institution always want to grow up to be a different kind of institution? He said, should a junior high school aspire to become a high school? That was the comparison he made. Why don't you be a really good junior high because there's a place for junior highs? A high school isn't better than a junior high - it's another phase in an educational process - but why should a community college aspire to grow up to be a university why not just be a really good college, but it is - there's something in the evolution of an institution and a desire for status and whatever that we wanted the degree-granting status and there became an argument for it. I guess one of my roles was really articulating those arguments in government documents. Things like the fact that we had students coming out with two years of commerce who couldn't get into commerce at the U of A because there just

wasn't enough room. It almost felt like we were defrauding these people - if you do really well here, you go on to commerce at the U of A except sorry about that they don't have room for you, so I guess you'll have to go somewhere else if you can. There was just so much demand. And the research that I was doing - we did follow-up studies with university transfer students after they had transferred and so many of them were telling us in these surveys, I wish we could have stayed at MacEwan. It was better there. I don't like the feel at the U of A. I'm just a number. My profs. don't know my name. I have to be so formal to them. At MacEwan, I called my profs. by their first name. Here you'd never get away with that. They don't know who I am. I'm just a number. The demand became strong enough that I supported it. Not that I'm claiming that if I didn't support it, it wouldn't have happened, but I felt better about what I was working on. That transition was really important. The funny little story with that is that there was a big reception in the library area in the vaulted part of the library. I guess I've never been known as somebody who has a particularly good poker face. I remember people looking at me sometimes in meetings when something outrageous was said - I couldn't look at you because the look on your face, I was going to burst out laughing. Well anyway, Paul Byrne got up, and he was speaking about the transition to degree-granting status and said that we were the first college in western Canada to get degree-granting status. And a couple of people around me - Mark Arnison, does that name ring a bell?

VM: Yes, I know him.

AV: Mark looked over at me and said, hmm, from the look on Alan's face, I'd say that's not true [laughter]. There were several colleges in BC that were still colleges but degree-granting. Somehow that always stuck in my mind [laughter]. It was an important

occasion, and whatever it was just I wish – and I dealt with this throughout my career of presidents - I came to view it as the presidential disease because I used to think it was just Gerry Kelly when he was the only person I'd worked for that wanted things embellished. I would come out with enrolment statistics, and he would say, couldn't you make them look a little better [laughter]? I remember having a discussion with him at one point and saying - and he was a tough guy to stand up to because he got quite angry. I said Gerry I can't do that, and I'll tell you why. I can't because you need to know what you get from me is the truth - you can spin it however you want. You take what I do and do whatever you want with it. Twist it, spin it. I don't think I said this but lie about it - but if I start doing it for you, then you will never know whether what you're getting from me is accurate or already spun. One of the few times I ever saw he backed down, you're right, you're right, I'm sorry I shouldn't ask you that. I realized after a while working with Paul and others that presidents always want things to look a little better, and I recognized I didn't want to deal in that realm. I wouldn't have been a good president because I didn't play those games. I didn't like the political side of things. The glad-handing and whatever. But there was always that tendency to take something and want to add just a little bit of spin on it to make it seem a little better. My feeling was why did you have to say we were the first ones in western Canada; it's not true. My feeling was always that weakens it. I bet I'm not the only person in the room who knows that's not true. I came to realize that after a while it's not Paul, it's not Gerry. Presidents do this. It seems to be part of the gig. That was one, and then, of course, the last one really was the strategic plan that I worked on on contract the year after because that was the first time that I was allowed to do the planning process the way I thought it should be

done. Previously there had always been limitations - we can't do that, we can't spend that much time, or no, I don't agree with this. David Atkinson said to me you're the expert in this tell us what process we should use. I outlined a process, and the university paid me about \$80,000 for that because it was a long, involved process, and I was charging consultants fees at that time. This was not my old hourly salary; this was real money. Not as much as I charge now, but that was my first year as a consultant, so I didn't know any better. That was probably another one simply because I was allowed to do it the way it should be done, and I think it worked quite well. The only problem I had, and I am probably going into excessive detail here. The only problem with that one was at the end, and it's always a problem as well - all of the objectives that came out of one part of it I remember saying umpteen times, too many. It's too many objectives. We've got to prioritize and get it down to a reasonable number, and this is something I learned over the years too that unless somebody at the top is prepared to really get draconian, it's hard to tell one vice-president, no you're going to have to cut yours. It came down to everybody wanting theirs in. It's all very well to say you should cut and I agree you should cut yours, and you should cut yours, but I'm not cutting mine, and of course, everybody says that. I remember thinking there's way too many, and you will find out a year or two from now that there are too many because you won't have done them. We will find out what our priorities were by the ones we actually worked on, and within a couple of years, I remember David saying to me in the hall yeah, you were kind of right about that, but what could you do. I guess those would be - they tended to be the big milestones because that was the level I was working at. I always said I didn't get the satisfaction that a faculty member would get of being in the classroom, and seeing

someone learn and seeing the light go and thinking I really made a difference to that person's life today. I always thought I hope that the difference I'm making is instead of making this much difference in a hundred students' lives, I'm making this much difference in 10,000 students' lives, so hopefully, it adds up to the same, but I could never see it. When I looked at this and thought the memorable events tend to be the big changes because that was what I was doing.

VM: And you definitely had a hand in this.

AV: Yes.

VM: I've asked a lot of questions today. Is there anything I failed to ask you that you want to share, but I just haven't given you the chance to?

AV: The one thing I remember thinking of just in terms of impact on people - one of the things my department was responsible for for some time and then it was taken over by AQuAA was faculty evaluation. We would, and at the time, this was a very labor-intensive process; one of my staff would go into the classroom and physically administer a paper survey. The faculty member would have to leave, and they would all fill it out, and then the faculty member would get a report on the quantitative questions the Likert scale questions. They would get basically a graph showing how they were rated versus the norms for their faculty or school and the college as a whole. Then they would get a transcript of the comments - no analysis because we actually had a legal opinion about that that said we were not liable for anything a student said about a faculty member as long as we did it verbatim [noise in the hallway]. If we edited and massaged it at all, then we became liable because it became our words and not just the student's words.

We had to be very careful the only thing - we only edited two things profanity and other people's names. If a student would say, you're not as good as Valla McLean. She's a way better instructor than you. Then we would have to say you're not as good as *** - that's all we did. I remember many times with faculty members coming in to see me about the report they had got and being absolutely distraught over a couple of comments. That was probably a lot of the personal interaction that I had with faculty at that time. Having to say to them, look at your graph. It looks like you did pretty well on average against lots of other people and sort of yeah, but look at these comments - how many students did you teach? With all of my classes about 200. And you have two really negative comments. Do you think, do you think everybody's going to love you? I mean, really. Some of these people were in tears. It doesn't feel good to have somebody say this person sucks as an instructor and should be fired, and sometimes it was that kind of a comment. This person's awful. They are a horrible instructor. The best thing you do is get rid of them. Okay, one student thinks like that, and you teach 200. You thought everybody was going to love you? It was such a common occurrence. What it told me was that people were pretty dedicated, and they were pretty concerned about good evaluations rather than saying, what do I care what students think. They don't matter. They were really concerned about it just remembering how many times and I can't count over those years. It wasn't at all rare. It was almost like a counselling session. Really don't take it - I mean yes if 80% of your students said that and your rating was at the lowest then you'd either better get some help or start thinking about another career.

VM: Right.

AV: But most of the time, it was really good people, whose ranking on the rest of the questions was very positive, and yet they would be beside themselves over one or two students that said I don't like you. Out of a hundred people who work for this institution, I bet there's more than two who don't like me [laughter].

VM: Well, thank you. I'd like to thank you very much for participating in this project.

AV: It's been a pleasure.

VM: And sharing your experiences. Thank you.

AV: This kind of thing is always fun because it encourages you to reflect on your own experience and what meant something. It's been great, thank you.

[End of interview]

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