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## Walter Williams Oral History

Walter Williams

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**Walter Williams, Oral History  
Denison University Student, Class of 1984**

**Recorded: July 19, 2010  
Interviewed by Vanessa Butler  
Transcribed by Kiara Sims**

**Part 1**

*[INTERVIEWER]: Hello, my name is Vanessa J. Butler, and I am a member of the class of 2011 at Denison University. I am interviewing you to gain a deeper understanding of how marginalized groups used protest to create social transformation by gaining power and influence. In particular, the study seeks to explore and document the historical origins and dynamics of periods of student protest at Denison by conducting oral history interviews with alumni, students, faculty, and administrators who are a part of these periods. We are interested in learning about the factors and conditions that, one, brought about protest on campus, and, two, determined your participation, or lack thereof, in protest to create social transformation.*

*Our data collection goal is to complement Denison's existing special collection and archive materials on student protest by collecting oral narratives from students, faculty, and staff that participated in black empowerment protests, the Black Student Union, and the development of the Black Studies Center at Denison. Based on our research thus far, Kent State University is the only other college that has a digital archive of oral narratives related to the Kent State shooting, located at their library web site.*

*Your interview will be tape recorded, transcribed, and placed in a digital archive, available at the Denison University Library, through its online web site, special collections and archive. This interview will take no longer than two hours. You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with Denison University.*

*The principal investigators for this study are Dr. Tina Pierce and Mr. Roger Kosson. Doane Library is sponsoring this project through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Next Generation Library's Mellon Grant for the 2010-2012 grant year.*

*Do you have any questions about this project before you begin?*

*[MR. WILLIAMS]: No, I do not.*

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, well since you do not have any, we'll move on to the procedures and tasks. At this point, what you've already done, I would like for you to read over and sign the consent form we have given you. To participate in this research, you must agree to have your interview tape recorded, transcribed, and placed in a digital*

*archive, available at the Denison University library, through its online web site, special collections and archive. Do I have your permission to audiotape this interview?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Yes, you do.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Audiotape recordings will be transcribed and will become a part of this research data, along with my notes. The audiotape data will contain appropriate attributions to your preferred name and title, as well as your affiliation with Denison University at the time of protest activity. Upon your request, portions of the interview may be labeled confidential and separated from the remainder of your answers. You may make this request at any time during the interview by telling me to keep your answer to a particular question or portion of an answer confidential. I will turn off the audiotape recorder upon your request to make confidential statements. Once you have finished making your confidential statements, please inform me, so that I can turn the audiotape recorder back on.*

*Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this project. I will ask you questions related to Denison University and student protest. You are expected to answer each question honestly and to the best of your abilities, based upon your knowledge and involvement with Denison University and student protest.*

*Information and details obtained in this interview will be used for several purposes: to complement the existing special collection archive materials, for the creation of a digital archive, as well as scholarly papers.*

*And so, within the alumni portion of the interview, there are several sub-sections, including background and context, the campus community and your relationship to it, power of the Black community, the Black Student Union and their role in protest and, finally, consequences and outcomes of political action in social change.*

*So we'll now move forward into the background and context portion of the interview. So these first questions I will be asking are background questions about how you came to be at Denison in your particular context, as well as the dynamics of the rest of the campus at that time.*

*So are you ready Mr. Williams?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Yes, I am.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, great. The first question: What city and state are you from?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Cleveland, Ohio.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, and what kind of high school did you attend, was it private, public, independent, charter?*

## Part 2

[MR. WILLIAMS]: It was an inner city school in Cleveland, Ohio.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, did you want to share the particular name?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Yes, the name was John F. Kennedy High School.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, and what was the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic composition of your high school?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: John F. Kennedy was a low and middle income high school in the Lee Harvard area of Cleveland, Ohio. But majority of the high school was ninety percent African American. My senior year was the first year of busing and we had a forty to sixty ratio of black students and white students.

*[INTERVIEWER]: And what year was that Mr. Williams?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Nineteen-eighty.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, so while you were in high school, what types of extracurricular activities, clubs, organizations, were you active in?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I was involved in marching band, the travel club, the chess club, the glee club, the debate club; that was about it right there.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Well, I mean that's enough to keep you busy. Sounds like a lot. So when you were considering the different colleges that you were applying to, what were some of your expectations for your overall college experience? I mean, did you expect it to be similar to your high school experience or did you want it to be different?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Well, I went in kind of blindly. I had no idea of what to expect. I knew I wanted a small college or university to attend, so that I wouldn't get lost in the numbers. So it was kind of a shock to me. I knew it was not going to be a large number of African Americans on campus, but that does not bother me. So it was totally, um, you could not anticipate what to expect.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, well, you said that you went into the college experience kind of blindly in terms of the application process. But could you discuss the factors that informed your decision to attend Denison?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I did not have very good SAT scores or ACT scores. In fact when I was privy to what was the African American students' SAT scores, I was one of the lowest students on the list of my classmates. However, the two lowest people on the list I'm proud to say we graduated in four years from Denison University. Whereas people who had higher SAT scores were not able to receive a degree from Denison University, so I was pretty proud of that.

But I had very limited choices. I applied to three other schools similar to Denison University. I was not accepted to any of them. I was on the verge of putting an application to a public university, which I was relatively sure that I would get accepted in. And I received announcement from Denison University that I was accepted, and there was a very nice financial aid package to complement that right there.

I do know that my high school counselor had a big impact in me getting accepted at the university. I was privy to a conversation she had with an administrator for admissions through Denison University - making them aware that this person, this young student, ignore his test scores and you have to look at what is inside his heart. So I would say I was a special project, special admissions. I didn't meet the criteria but I had the heart.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Wow! That's awesome! That's great. Well, let's talk about some of your expectations and impressions of Denison before you came in terms of academic and culture of the college. The experience you thought you would have relating to diversity. Can you speak to some of those?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Although I grew up in a neighborhood that was predominantly African American, I did attend social functions at home, making me aware of a wider community. I attended several debutantes, cotillions - or before proms and before my prom, my high school prom, so I was familiar with social settings and these events exposing to...

### **Part 3**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...a different type of audience, which I was very comfortable in. So when I got to Denison University I kind of knew what to expect, so it didn't surprise me. And it was difficult but I kept thinking the entire four years was, I am getting a very darn good education for very little amount of money. And so I can sacrifice four years of my social, um, social networking, social entertaining, for a good education. So I was willing to make that sacrifice.

My first impression when I arrived on campus and I sat in the middle of the quad, and I looked at the buildings and looked at how gorgeous the campus was, I saw that ease. When I think of this was the only school that accepted me, but I found out this is a place I can come and excel.

At first I thought I wanted to go into biology, to go into dentistry, but when I got there and took my first semester of courses, I realized how far behind I was to my peers. Interestingly enough, in my first English class when the students are talking about the classics that they read in high school and commenting and relating the classics to literature that we were reading in Freshman English, I was dumbfounded. I could not participate in those conversations because I have not read the classics. I had no idea what they were referring to. And everyone else it was just common knowledge. So I was behind everyone, so it took a little while for me to catch up.

Fortunately at Denison University the counselors were very helpful, they were interested in you as a student, and interested in you achieving. And um, two counselors Dr. Woodyard from the Religion Department

*[INTERVIEWER]: He still teaches here.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: took me under his wing along with Dr. Bennett; he is passed away, he was an English professor. And they designed a course of study classes for me and my major that I should take in progression to help me prepare myself.

And a lot of students would have done this on their own but I trusted them. And I'm glad I did. And they helped develop me as a student. I took several of their classes and I had to work harder, but it was well worth the effort. Because I knew that they were only going to help me be able to graduate from Denison University. So very good counseling, very good attention to the students. And essentially my fate was in their hands with what classes to take. So...

*[INTERVIEWER]: Wow! Okay. Now that you talked about some of your course work and things like that initially, can you speak on as if there were any stories about racial tension on Denison's campus, you heard about before arriving?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I did not hear about any of that, um, with during the orientation. You heard about it when you were on campus in close proximity with all the students and hearsay. But those stories never interfered or came in the picture.

I was a very confident young man. I knew that if I applied myself I could succeed. And, again, I always thought that this was an education that I couldn't afford elsewhere. When you look at the private schools versus public schools in the amount of grants and tuition assistance they give, the private schools far exceeded that of the public schools. And again my thought was I come from a poor family, this is my only opportunity to get an education of this magnitude.

The other thing, Ms. Butler, is since I came from a family of blue collar workers, and I wanted to enter a profession of white collar profession, didn't know what it was at that time. I thought I needed the networks of colleagues who had access. And Denison gave me that right there. I am proud to say that my first boss was a Denison alum, and I believe that helped me. The name of the school helped me and it helped open doors for me. I'm pretty sure there's...

#### **Part 4**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...another mechanism - fraternities at larger public universities that are just as productive. But I thought they are being myopic, which was not a penalty. That going to a private school with local contacts will help me immensely in my career.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Sounds great! Did you have any more comments you want to make about your background before we move on to the next section?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Regarding the background and I indicated that I was unprepared to enter Denison, and at the time, I learned of this later, that being on the admissions and trying to get more African Americans into the school, they were looking at different African American students from different cultural aspects, to see what was successful there.

Prior to my coming to the campus, they attempted to attract African American students from the middle to upper income levels and that was partly successful, but not really successful. And in our class, 1980, class of 1980, they went to the inner city a little bit more aggressively. They sought out African American students who were hungry. And I guess they measured their hungriness by their involvement in other activities, to make sure they were rounded individuals, that if they brought them to campus, would they excel in this environment that was not the greatest.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Well, now that I had the opportunity to hear more about your background before your arrival at Denison, we will now move on into the second part of the interview; the campus community and your relationship to it. These questions will explore what was going on in the country at that time as well. So, just to jump right in to it, what was going on in the country at the time when you arrived at Denison?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Well, at the time there's two events that happened. The death of John Lennon, he deeply impacted the community, and the election of Ronald Reagan as President. And thirdly, which is overriding everything was the elevation of the women's liberation, women's rights on campus.

The Women's Studies Department led by Fitzgerald, they wore black ribbons around their arms after the election of Ronald Reagan as a way of protesting. And I come from a family that has always been respectful of everyone else, regardless of who you are.

And I recall one story of being in the student union and I was trying to watch the football game. And a young lady stopped right in front of the television and I asked the young lady, "Can you move so I can watch television." And after I said that, it was almost as if I called her a four letter word. "I am a woman. I am not lady." Well, what's your problem? I didn't know the woman's name. I was being polite. I asked her politely to move so I can watch television. But she made a big scene in the student union about me calling her a lady. I was kind of dumbfounded because what did I do wrong here? I just asked politely in a nonthreatening type of way. Can you move over young lady so I can watch television? Nonthreatening. I didn't get out of my seat.

So I was pretty perturbed about what happened here. So Monday I went in to see my professor who was Ann Fitzgerald, who was my English professor, what happened here? And she informed me that lady is a term that they refer to as lady of the night. I said, Dr. Fitzgerald, we have a cultural problem here because lady in my society or in my culture

is viewed upon as very positive. And here I am being chastised for something that I believe the person was out of line for doing this. And she would not acknowledge that but more or less made me aware that I had to change my ways to adapt to the different society.

The other thing was because of Reagan was elected...

## **Part 5**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...President, President of the United States. We had the rampant unemployment, we were going through the recession, previous classes were not getting jobs, so that put people on edge.

But there was also a person they brought in to speak; his name was Dr. Walter E. Williams. And I was the person who picked him up from the airport and took him back. I didn't know what he was about. I thought it was nice that the university would bring in an African American lecturer to speak. And that was interesting to hear what he had to say.

And I must say he had a big influence on my life because when he spoke, he spoke about things I believed in. And he was almost speaking for me and I never heard an African American speak of it before. He is a conservative and when he was speaking in the lecture hall, several black students walked out in protest. Well, what is your problem here? Listen to the man. But I would have to say, Ms. Butler, that he changed my life because I am a black conservative because of that right now.

*[INTERVIEWER]: What particular department brought him? Was it the Political Science Department or was it the school, or was it a lecture series?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Conservative Lecture Series.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Oh. Okay, okay.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: And till this day I have a relationship with Walter E. Williams. I called him up on the radio station and we had an opportunity to talk. So he has been a great influence on my life.

*[INTERVIEWER]: That's great! And plus you guys have the same name.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Exactly.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Great connection there. Well, we talked about what was going on at Denison at that time. What about in Granville? I know it is a small town but what about in Granville?*



[MR. WILLIAMS]: We were connected with Granville. Again we were 2,000 some odd students up on top of the hill. As African American students we walked down to the town, the city, to purchase our goods. There was no problem there. I attended church on the corner, very well received and very well accepted. I don't remember anything about the community of Granville except for lack of restaurants or fast food places. But other than that, businesses were cordial, welcoming students regardless of your race. So never an issue.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay, what was some your initial reactions of being in the town of Granville as well as outside of Granville? I know you are from Cleveland but then you have Columbus. I don't know about your accessibility to Columbus at the time.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: At the time there was a Trailways bus that came to Granville from Columbus. So in order to get to school, without asking my parents for a ride, I took the Greyhound bus to Columbus and from Columbus I took the Trailways bus to Granville. Very convenient.

Columbus gave me the opportunity to explore the big city and get a haircut. The bus here was relatively cheap, twelve dollars back and forth. And I believe the bus came once or twice per day during my four years at Denison University. It gave me access and my senior year I had a vehicle but it wasn't really a problem. They had everything there.

Denison kept you so busy academically. You literally had no free time to go out and explore and be part of the city life. Maybe I was more of a hermit than other students. Monday through Friday with work study and my class load, I had very little time for social life.

*[INTERVIEWER]: What were some of your initial reactions after being at Denison as a student?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I always recall driving, going to Denison and seeing the steeple up to the Swasey Chapel. And as soon as a you saw that steeple coming over the hills off of six-eleven, it gave me a knot in my stomach, knowing that until I go home again, this knot was gonna be there. And a knot...

## **Part 6**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...that was there because although you were well received by the majority of students, there were some elements of the community that did not accept you well, and that you were unwelcomed there. And they made you feel that way.

I remember going out of Slayter Hall one day and a fellow student asked me, am I part of the Physical Plant? I am like, "What are you talking about?" "Do you work at the Physical Plant?" "No, I'm a student here." So that was pretty insulting right there. I was

not dressed as a Physical Plant worker. But you had this knot, and I believe everyone had that knot in their stomach because of the tension there, it wasn't home.

And I think this is very appropriate to tell you now because I am pretty sure it's going to come up. We had the opportunity our J Term to visit an African American school. We had an exchange program with Morehouse and Spellman College in Atlanta. And I didn't participate in this program but several other African Americans students did participate in the program. Whereby fellow African American students from Denison visited those colleges and several of their students came up and visited our school.

And I have to tell you, Ms. Butler, there was a stark contrast between those students that came to the campus for one month and left. Those students had their head up, they were proud, they knew who they were, and they could articulate that.

We were so beaten down because of being in a place that we weren't really one hundred percent effective, just trying to get by. You could see the differences in our personalities, in our outlook, and how we interacted with each other. I recall working with a person from a predominantly black school later on in life and how proud he was and who he knew he was. And here I was always questioning myself.

So there was a difference when you come from a nurturing environment where they nurture you not just academically but emotionally. And you can see that in how we carried ourselves as students. Very stark difference.

*[INTERVIEWER]: How did your initial impressions of Denison change after you arrived, and what kinds of impressions changed for the better and for the worse?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Again, I was not surprised when I got to campus of what to expect. And again, I always thought the entire four years that this is a great opportunity and I will not get this any place else. What I did know that mentally that I was going to be a wreck when I finished this place. My parents were loving parents but they had no idea of what I was going through because they never experienced this themselves, they always worked in a factory. And it will take me years to get my feet back on the ground. Some African Americans took quicker than others but for me it took a little while to get my bearings straight. But once I did I never looked back. Do you understand what I am saying?

*[INTERVIEWER]: I do. I do. I really do.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: It was a very challenging environment. It made you question yourself. You had this, I wouldn't say inferiority complex, you just couldn't project yourself because in that environment your never knew when you were going to be knocked out. And being knocked out mentally is pretty rough.

I must share with you, I went on to get my MBA and there were two classes in this program which weeded students out. And I barely squeezed by the both classes and I had to take the same professor who is known to weed students out of the program, for my last

class. And this professor did not like my attitude or my disposition because the MBA program that I was...

## **Part 7**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:... in not only trained people, but it trained leaders. And this is what they were known to do. They did not want the person having a degree from this university who did not represent the university.

So the professor took it upon himself to get me some extra attention to try to see what I was made out of. And we had a couple of words towards the end and the reason he provoked that, he wanted to see if I had it in me. And I had to explain to him that I spent four years at a university where I was just trying to get by.

And I explained to him that isn't it ironic that it is 1995 and I am only the second African American to go through the MBA program at this distinctive university. I am tired of making waves. I am tired of being the only black student. I am tired of representing the African American here.

Right now, the only thing I want to do is get my degree and get on with my life. My job requires this degree in order to keep my job. And right now you are standing in between me and my family eating right now, and I don't appreciate that. And I think you are being unfair. And he looked at me and said, "That's what I wanted from the beginning."

You have to understand the position the student has in class before you make these judgments here. Only thing I could think about was all the postal shootings that were going on and it was the new word in our lexicon, going postal. I was very close to going postal on this professor who was treating me unfairly. And his reasons were, he wanted to see what you were made out of.

*[INTERVIEWER]: I don't think so.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I was trying to keep food on my family's table, here you're trying to make a point. I'm doing the grades, I'm doing the work. Are you treating other students the same way? That right there was an awakening for coming out of your shell from what Denison tried to beat out of you, from that point on.

I must tell you, I regret how it was done, but I needed it to be done when I look back at what the professor did. Because I was a softy. I was just trying to get by. I was this innocent mentality. Let me get under the radar and get what I needed to get and get on with it, but it was much more than that. So he did me a service but the way he did it. I would have done just as well with a conversation, if he had a one-on-one conversation.

*[INTERVIEWER]: What organizations were you involve in while you were here?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I was the editor of the Black Student Newspaper, Alternative News. I was one of the first Black Studies majors. I received a joint degree in Economics and Black Studies. And Dr. John Jackson was my mentor. I thoroughly enjoyed his lectures, his teaching, and his instruction.

When I got to campus I was given a work-study job of working in the kitchen, and I knew that this was not going to work out. Because I was not blessed with a good skin and I had oily skin and pimples. And working inside the kitchen was only going to make the situation worse. So I decided I can't do this, I have to find something different. And I quit that job, but before I quit I had another job lined up.

I was the women's field hockey manager. So I got to travel with all the women to their games, I trained with them, and I was their manager. And that was my work-study program. Very lucrative job, very easy job. They gave me the chance for physical exercise, and they get out and go to different campuses in the division. The following year, Dr. Jackson was always wishing that someone will take up – do the newspaper.

## **Part 8**

[MR. WILLIAMS]: So I decided let me do that as a work-study program. And what I did was I wrote the newsletters over breaks; Christmas, summer breaks, and spring break. So during my work-study, I did my study. I studied because I did the other items at another time. And it was a good arrangement for me and helped me learn.

It was ironic because being editor of the black newspaper already because of my leanings being more conservative than my colleagues, my peers, I was considered not black enough. Why am I the editor of the newspaper when I don't hang out with all the black students? I don't do the activities. I was often known as an Uncle Tom at the time.

But no one else picked up to write the newspaper and I was the only one willing to do it and I did it.

And the story that got the most attention was, I believe it was my third year as a student there, I wrote about my summer experience. I worked as a teller for a commercial bank. The bank that also gave me my first job when I graduated, and I recall being at the lunch table with my fellow college students. We were all tellers in the summer program and I indicated to them that we were having a conversation, talking about the Cleveland Indians, Cleveland Browns and other Cleveland-related sports.

And when I spoke they ignored me. They wouldn't acknowledge my existence. And it only took me to say two things inside the conversation to realize that something is wrong here. Something is not right there. What's happening here? Why are they just pretending that I have not spoken any words to contribute to the conversation? So I sat the next hour remaining in my lunch break in silence in disbelief at what just happened here.

The following days I sit down in lunch by myself and they came to join me. I tried to add to the conversation and they continued to ignore me, wouldn't acknowledge anything I said. The person said the same thing after me and they got all of the acknowledgments saying, oh, that's a good thought right there. What's happening? Why are you doing this to me? What have I done to you?

And I wrote about that when I got back, in the newsletter. How we are invisible to our white peers and what it felt like. And that had a good response on campus because other students had experienced similar things, and it was like a coming out of wow, this is real and this is how it affected me, that attitude.

And at the time the campus was going through some racial workshops where they brought in this person who was very controversial, who turned up the other to talk about racial issues. And it made a lot of people feel uncomfortable. And when you look back, there's been things written about this person's procedures, was not always in the best interest or not well received because it put too many people off. But again, that's what we were doing in the Eighties and that's what they thought would be effective. So it got the conversation going, stimulate this conversation, and it moved the conversation further. And I was happy to contribute to that.

And by the way, after I wrote that article, I was finally accepted into the Black community as being black. So not only was I ostracized from the white community, but I was ostracized from the Black community. And I must tell you this, and you can tell your father this, I always play angles. I always got along with whoever was coming to campus so I can be one if not the only black student invited to the President's house to eat dinner because the President's house served some nice dinners when they had people from the lecture series, and...

## **Part 9**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...you could call me whatever you want, but you don't call me hungry. And I ate very good. And I also on a side note thought the food that they served on campus was very good. I had no issues with it. No, it wasn't home, but I could see the majority of black students gaining weight as opposed to losing weight during our four years there.

But, anyway, I positioned myself to take the people to the airport so I could be invited to the President's house to eat. And one day I was having a function in there and the Black Student Union was having a party in his room. And I lived on the other side of campus, this was my second year. And I did not want to go to the other side of campus to change clothes, so I decided to go from the President's house to the Black Student Union. I was dressed for the President's house preppy, that's what we did back in the day. With our buck shoes and izod polo shirt, and some slacks, either khaki or the preppy plaid.

So I walked into the Black Student Union with my outfit on from the President's house. I got stares and looks and the DJ stopped the music, turned on the lights, looked at me and said, "Well, you're not dressed right. Go back and change." It's like the world stopped until I left the place. And someone said, "Your pants look like my suitcase." I was too embarrassed and humiliated to go back and change. So I just called it a night and said the hell with this, I am not coming back here. Nope.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Wow. That's really interesting. I see a lot of that happening still, oddly enough. It's like a cycle almost you know. It's the same thing happening over and over. You gave me a little sense of the status of students of color on campus. I mean you knew around percentages of your high school. Did you know that about Denison?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: No, again I was not too concerned with that because I was just happy to be accepted. Offline I could tell you who was the bottom of the list on the SAT scores because I worked for the Black Studies. Dr. Jackson had access to this information. He was on the panel for admissions to get more African Americans accepted to the university and they were trying everything. So I was just being nosy one day and I looked in the file and our SAT scores and what they were. Again I wasn't the lowest. What separated me from the lowest person was one or two points, but I am happy to say that the bottom feeders were the ones who did well.

*[INTERVIEWER]: What was the climate like for the students of color? Wait, before we get into that can you describe what racial groups were represented on campus because we haven't touched on that?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Except for a long time ago we had Asians, we had people from the Caribbeans, we had people from different continents of Africa. We had a roommate and your father and I roomed with a person because this was different because he was unfamiliar with a toilet. And we would come back and say what's happening here. Was it an accident? He was just unfamiliar with the use of the toilet, something as simple as that. He was a nice guy and all but he made us all look differently. Okay, we need to show him where to put things. So we were a little represented. I could not tell you who was exactly there, who was not. Indians were there. I dated a woman who was from Indian descent on campus.

*[INTERVIEWER]: What was the climate like for these students? And can you share a story to describe the climate?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: There was an international...

## **Part 10**

[MR. WILLIAMS]: ...dorm I believe. And again they had the same issues that we had, probably not to the magnitude. Their hair wasn't kinky like ours; we were so much different. But they were well assimilated into the environment. They were extremely

intelligent. So academically they didn't have the issues that the African Americans had on campus. But they thought like us with the minority. And they were always very nice, kind.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Sorry. To go back, you said that it was a separate housing...*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Yes! I believe it was the International House where international students stayed. But also not only culturally, differences, but there was another group of students who lived out at the Homestead. And I was good friends with several of them and they were treated very harshly by the majority of students as well. You would have thought that they were all black, the way they were treated. Because they didn't smell good, they looked kind of scraggly around the edges. But they were good people; they were fun to go out and party with and be around.

At one time I was considering running for Student Council. I was thinking about being President of Student Council because I had name recognition. And I got a letter from - there was this underground white society that told me not to run because things will come out that I would be ashamed of. And yes, there were some things that I did not need to come out because I wasn't a saint. I did what I was supposed to do but I also am a little devil at heart. And there were some things that could have come out that would have been very uncomfortable for me, as well as professors at campus. And they knew about that and at that time I made it known that I was no longer interested in running.

*[INTERVIEWER]: You described a little earlier about what your relationship was like with some of the other students of color. But did any of these relationships change during and following protest, and if so how did they change?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Again the protest that occurred, occurred on campus before 1980. We were the recipients of everything that was done up to 1980. During my four years there, there was very little if no protest. Now the university started cutting back because of the abuses that the black students did with their newfound power. So that kind of curtailed what we could do because of previous misdeeds.

The Black Student Union had a car dedicated to themselves that was abused and taken away. Our budget was constantly being challenged by the majority because my class, we had several students who joined fraternities. And the majority used that to say that they don't need as big of a budget because they are being successful. Which, that's a valid point; that argument was made. But we had to fight to maintain our budget. We had to justify that. We had to do things, not just party.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Well that's concluding with that section. We are interested in understanding the power of the Black community in the institutional structure and also the broader social community of Denison. So this project overall defines power as the ability through institutional - institutional meaning defined and designated ability to act through university structures and non-institutional coercion or influence to cause others*

*to act according to the will of the community. So keeping our definition of power in mind, how would you describe the power of the Black community at Denison?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Well, collectively we were losing influence because we were a broader spectrum. Our interest...

## **Part 11**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...Again, we did not have a need to protest like our earlier class had to do. However, because maintaining a good African American population on campus was the goal of the Administration, we the Black community, individually had a lot of power.

The school bent over backwards to accommodate our needs individually. I recall one of my roommates, George Johnson, they just wanted him out, and they just wanted him to graduate. And he designed his own major and till this day I don't even know what he knows what his major was, but they bent over backwards to accommodate him and get him graduated from the school. So the power is that the university overreacted and bent rules to accommodate the black students, which was not always helpful in the long run to the black students.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Why would you say that?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: You get everything you want, you don't walk away with what you should be walking away with, which is a degree that would be able to help you in the future.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Can you share a story describing the use of power by the Black community to address their political, social, and economical position at Denison? I mean, you describe the election of Reagan. I mean those within itself, did those types of issues touch home here for the students? Or was it just kind of like that's more of a broader and national issue?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Well, there were still some things that happened at the university. During the 1980s there were families and students who were involved in the financial crisis, the savings and loan crisis, and they went to jail because of that. So that was occurring. The other item was, I am trying to think here... Reagan had a big influence on, the election of Reagan, what he proposed to do and what he did. The Cameo came out with a song called "Word" and that was directly related to Reagan getting elected. What is your word? What did you say? What are you going to do? Did you know that?

*[INTERVIEWER]: I actually never heard that song. I know the group but I never heard that song.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Oh God. Google or YouTube Cameos' Word Up.



*[INTERVIEWER]: OH! Okay, Word Up! Now I know what you mean.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: So that's how big of influence it had on the campus and what was happening at the time. There was another point I wanted to make but it loses. So give me the question again.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Can you share a story describing the use of power by the Black community to address their political, social, and economic position at Denison?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: No, I cannot.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay. Did the power of the Black community change while you were at Denison? If so, how and what?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Well, our power was diminishing because our influence was diminishing. When I came the class of 1980 was the largest African American class there was. It dropped off our second year but by the third and fourth year they were bringing in twenty plus students annually to the university. I don't know how big your class was...

*[INTERVIEWER]: I think I want to say around 150.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Okay. Again when I arrived on campus there were only five students on campus, five African American students on campus.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Total? Wait five students total.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Five African American students total.

*[INTERVIEWER]: And that was in 1980?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: That's correct. For some reason that never sticks in my brain 1980, previous classes, so they had a much worse time we had. We had numbers there.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Was it that the students were being brought in and the retention rate was low or is it that students of color at all were not being brought in?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: The retention rate was low. They were being brought in. I am pretty sure they had ten or fifteen in their classes but again this was over the course of four years...

## Part 12

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I could not give you a distribution of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors of those five individuals. But that was all that was on campus. Our power was diminishing, but individually it was increasing.

I remember the story I wanted to tell you earlier. Again, I am very close to professors because I am very grateful for professors and the instruction that I received. And in Economics I was under the tutelage of Dr. Henderson, and he was the chair of the department. And I was also in his weeding, that's how close I got to him. I did my senior research with him.

But I also had a chance to go through his files. I like history. I like to know what has happened before. And in his files I read letters from students' parents during the Vietnam era, who were asking the professors to be lenient on their son in regards to grades because he is going to flunk out and have to go to war. And it wasn't one, it wasn't two; it was a plethora of letters I read.

And I am annoyed with the fact that if there is something going on and you want to avoid it, why would you not put yourself to your studies to prevent yourself from being enlisted. Why did your parents need to write a letter pleading for the professor to give you a good grade? And I was not afraid to say what happened here. And he shared with me the story behind the letters.

And my question was, would you have done this for an African American student? And it was silence. I didn't do anything for African American students. Okay. Right here I see this should not have taken place at all. They should have been on the merits of their grades and pleading for grades.

And I believe and the black African American students believe that they were being graded differently from other students. So our C in a class actually meant a high B in other places, if we were to go to another university, I believe. And I found that personal to believe that.

I had an opportunity of being a TA for Dr. Jackson during my senior year of the program. And I graded the Black Studies 101, which was an elective that you had to take culturally, for Women's Studies, Black Studies, or some other type of studies. And I read the papers. And these papers were from seniors and juniors. I saw them that they could barely put two sentences together on a lot of these papers. Either they did not take the time and did not put any effort into it. Or was this a general, okay, this is who we are?

Their writing was no better than mine. And, Ms. Butler, I was not the best writer when I came to Denison, and I still struggle. I need to have a person to proofread my papers. I have gotten better, but you just make sure it's proofread before you send it out. But what I read, I question myself, did they have the same professors that I had? I remember having a paper with so much red on it that it had more red ink than black typeface. And I

just remember that if I just put my name on a piece of paper, you will find fault with that, wouldn't you? That's how bad it was. I did learn the system. I did understand what was happening, so I got through.

One other story, this may go into a different section. Ann Fitzgerald, Women's Studies Department, English teacher. I did not know that as a male you had to go into her office and cry before she treated you, give you a passing grade, or treated you better. Now all the other students, white students, had already went in to her office...

### **Part 13**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...and cried. And their grades improved. I did not know this and finally someone said to me towards the end of the semester, "Hey Walt, had you gone to her office and cried?" "No what're you talking about?" "Do it." And that's all they said. And I did it and my grade started to improve. I had less red ink on my papers. So it was a little power struggle and the power struggle was not just with African Americans but with all males on campus. So it was a tough period for guys.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Well, we will go ahead and move forward to the next section, which is the Black Student Union. Now that I had the opportunity to hear more about the campus community and the power of the Black community, I would like to move into the fourth part of this interview and learn more about the Black Student Union, hence forth identified as the BSU. So how did you initially learn about the BSU and what were some of your thoughts about it after you learned about it?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: My freshman dorm was right above the entryway to the BSU.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Oh, you lived in Smith?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Yes I was in Smith right above that room. It was hard for me not to know they existed. And I had the biggest boom box at the time. If you remember the movie "Do the Right Thing."

*[INTERVIEWER]: Oh yeah.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: With the guy who was carrying the boom box. Well my boom box was even bigger than that one right there. My boom box was used to connect the turntable and gave enough sound to shake the hall. My bedroom was dancing with the beat of the bass. It was hard for me to ignore that, so that's how I became familiar.

One of the things that I really enjoyed was Michael Nobel had a church. His father was a pastor who later became a trustee to the university. We attended church services at his church. And this was a BSU function where we got together in a van and went out there

for Sunday services and church fed us and brought us back to campus, which was very nice.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Michael Nobel is he related to Dale, President Dale T. Noble?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I am not sure but his father was on the Board of Trustees. He was a senior pastor.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay. Well I was just trying to make a connection, but okay. Did you join the BSU and become an active or inactive member?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I was an active member but again, I was not considered, you know, to call it, I was an Uncle Tom, because I associated with everyone on campus. I didn't limit myself just to the black students.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Right. Did you believe that the BSU was cohesive or fractured? Was the Black community able to pursue issues with solidarity?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Well, Ms. Butler, the problem with the environment was that you were so concerned about your grades and being inside the university, that that prevented you from whooping and hollering about black-related issues. Your self-preservation was a first line of order. And we got together and we socialized together. This was important because it gave us a chance to exhale, be ourselves with no pretensions and exist and get stronger.

We had a wonderful gospel choir led by Raymond Weiss (?), and Tiger, and Edwin Nicholas. And that brought the community together. We had concerts; these were uplifting, cultural reinforcements that we were denied during the time.

But your question, did we organize? No, we couldn't do that. We were - self-preservation was the first law of order. Whereas other students who came before us had the strength academically to not only organize and protest. I believe our class was much weaker collectively that we had to tend to ourselves, make sure that we still existed.

I must share this with you, I am mildly dyslexic. I did not know this until I came upon a professor where I understood everything but during the test it just went south...

## **Part 14**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:...It's manageable, but until I came to grasp with that and being relaxed, I had to worry about maintaining my grades so that I could come back.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Well, within the community of the BSU were there issues surrounding gender, sexual activity, socio-economic class, differences based upon Greek affiliation?*

*Where those types of things that maybe broke down otherwise or, as you keep saying, was it always, "Let's put our coursework first?"*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Let's put our coursework first, was the priority. Now, there were very few women who joined sororities but several guys joined fraternities when I was on campus. Now there was one fraternity that was very popular and the alternative to the Black Student Union. I believe it was the Delta Chi or something like that. Because of the music they played they welcomed African Americans to come party with them on Fridays. I never did.

I was one of the first people to venture off and join a white fraternity. I joined Kappa Sigma. And again I was ridiculed for it but my purpose was I was trying to create another venue where African Americans students could come and relax. I picked a fraternity that was open to African Americans. That would accept them and play the music that we enjoyed.

So I picked Kappa Sigma and during my time there on campus, three other black students joined me, joined the fraternity. And again it created another venue as an alternative to the Black Student Union, because when you only have a party once per month, what are you going to do the other three weekends? And both of us didn't have transportation to go anywhere, so we were kind of excluded.

Now, I believe that Delta DU had a party that African Americans attended. The Black Student Union. Now Kappa Sigma was open to allowing other black students coming down and having a good time. You know just shake your booty and forget about your coursework for a little while. Being a trailblazer I was called names but I did it for that purpose.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Did you ever read any of the writings in the Vanguard or Black Rage?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Yes I did, yes we did. We were familiar. And again our hats are off to those students who did that because they not only were smart academically to maintain in this tough environment but they also had the order to organize themselves for that.

*[INTERVIEWER]: In your opinion what was the impact of these forms of literature within the campus community?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: It helped to unify. It was some good articles in there. So it helped unify and where did we come from and where were we going?

*[INTERVIEWER]: Unify in terms of what community, the Black community?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: The Black community.

*[INTERVIEWER]: So were white students not really aware?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: They were not aware of it at the time we were there.

*[INTERVIEWER]: How did the BSU educate their members in campus overall about what was going on in the campus community and nationally, in terms of the social transformation of the position of Black communities and political institutions in society?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: We did not have a role. Again we were self-preservation. We were there; we got some money which allowed us to do certain things. And we did not give back as our peers, predecessors, gave back.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Were there any doubts while you were there that the BSU acted politically spontaneously? Or were things organized in terms of, let's reach out and try to address a certain issue?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: I remember very few issues. I am reading what your class and what other classes have done after us and how you are much more involved politically about the campus environment. We got together if there was a blackface or something of some other issue...

## **Part 15**

[MR. WILLIAMS]:... We wrote a letter to the editor explaining or [sic] condoning that type of behavior. But other than that there were very few times. We were not as active as we should have, could have been.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Do you regret that at all?*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Again, we were trying to survive. Again, I am pretty sure you were much better prepared than Dan or I to attend Denison University. So, after you guys settled there you knew how to operate within the schedule, you knew what your capabilities were, you had a lot more freedom than we had at the time.

I need to emphasize in case you didn't hear this. Our class were from the inner city schools, the bulk of us, because they were trying to figure out what students would be successful in this environment. Because we were challenged academically, we had very few other avenues to put energy in. If I put in a lot of effort in I was going to get an "A." If I put in so-so effort I am going to get a "B." But I am going to put in so much effort so I know I am going to pass this course. That's the thinking. When you first get on campus, what am I gonna have to do to get a passing grade?

In graduate school it is the same thing. After you decide that you can do this then you can start doing other things. I started a family and I had a couple of kids because I could mentally segment my academic world from my work life from my family life. Back in 1980, when we got to campus - and this needs to be stressed - it was all about the

academics, maintaining your GPA so you can stay inside of the school. Things have changed now, hasn't it?

*[INTERVIEWER]: It has! And I think from getting a taste of what was going on from your class, late Sixties, early Seventies. I think what you're saying and what I heard my dad say about the experience, it is a little bit different. But I think coming from where you're coming from and what you've shared, that makes sense.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: When we got together five years, ten years for our reunions, we all commented that when we got out of school and started working - unless we went to graduate school immediately - we were behind our peers who went to other universities - public schools, private schools. Because they were trained to do something, they were trained for accounting, business management. We were trained to think. So we were behind the eight ball at first.

But our ten year reunion we saw a change. We could make the same observations. We are now the bosses, the supervisors of the people who were ahead of us when we came out of school because we saw the bigger picture, we could articulate that.

Then you question, where do you place a liberal education? When I had my son, unfortunately my oldest one, academically, was not eligible to go there. But I thought now in 2010, would not be a good place to have a liberal arts education. Again, I love Denison but unless you are going to go to graduate school or get a job like I had, but they are very competitive. I did not think highly of a liberal arts education.

*[INTERVIEWER]: I would like to thank you so much for sharing a little bit of your history today. I have definitely gained much more appreciation about the Black history of Denison's campus and I know other individuals from my generation and other generations to come would hone in on this knowledge and grow from it. Not only as a black student but also as a black individual, so I really want to thank you so much for taking the time and speaking with me today.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Off the record. Turn off the tape please.

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay...*

## **Part 16**

*[INTERVIEWER]: Okay.*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Ask your father what his SAT scores were. Have you compared yours with his?

*[INTERVIEWER]: NO*

[MR. WILLIAMS]: Okay...