

Monmouth Memories

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Interviewee: Philip Donahue

Interviewer/Transcriber: Professor Melissa Ziobro

“It was a very important and stimulating time.”

After initially dropping out of high school at the age of 16, Professor Philip Donahue graduated from Temple University with a BS degree in Science and Education in 1954. He immediately began teaching at a high school in Bucks County, Pa. He taught there for 4 ½ years, during which time he began graduate work at Penn. After the completion of his Master’s in History, Mr. Donahue secured a position at the then Monmouth College in 1960. He taught at Monmouth until he retired in 1992 at the age of 64. Still, he taught Western Civ part-time until 2002.

Mr. Donahue reflects on his time teaching high school fondly, noting that most academics never receive training in how to educate, or have contact with that type of educational experience. He said the experience taught him “that students are people, and they have feelings, and desires...” He noted that more academics could benefit from this, although “teaching high school is very difficult work” and “I never worked so hard in my life as I did those 4 ½ years.”

A former teacher of Mr. Donahue’s was on the faculty at Monmouth when Donahue applied, and this proved an icebreaker of sorts. The campus struck Donahue as “beautiful;” if a “palatial campus for the quality of education that was being conducted.” In Mr. Donahue’s opinion, “when I first went to Monmouth in 1960, it didn’t strike me as a college, quite frankly.” He discusses some peculiarities about President Schlaefler (1957-1962) and his administrators, and notes that there was a “great deal of tension” between the faculty and administration.

The formation of the faculty union occurred in the 60s as a result of this tension over issues such as an arbitrary faculty pay system and unfair hiring/continuance/promotion practices.

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Mr. Donahue notes the case of Michael Greenberg, a historian whose contract was not renewed after Greenberg dared to question invited speaker General Maxwell Taylor on the U.S. government's prosecution of the War in Vietnam. Though Mr. Donahue played but a supporting role in the formation of the union, he would later go on to serve as its President.

Of his tenure as union President, Mr. Donahue cites a faculty strike as a point of pride (per Donahue, see the FAMCO archive for photos, etc.). The strike, which shut down the school for about two weeks, led to the ouster of the school's President, and to the faculty, for the first time, participating in the selection of the new President, Samuel Hays Magill (1980-1993). This set a precedent for faculty governance. Faculty might not always get their way in how the school was run, but at least they'd have a say. Pay disparities were also addressed during the strike. Overall, it "was a very liberating experience," according to Donahue. The new President, Magill, was a "cultured man" who came from "a broad" educational background, according to Donahue. His ideas about what a college could and should be meshed much better with those of the faculty than past Presidents.

On his disappointments as union President, Mr. Donahue feels that he lost a battle with regards to the hiring/continuance process. In his eyes, it remained arbitrary. Many strong teachers and academics never received tenure – or were never even on the tenure track—for indiscriminate reasons. At several points in the interview, this theme reoccurs. Mr. Donahue believes passionately that insisting people live on short term contracts or letting "very good teachers and promising scholars be without a position" was/is "a terrible thing to do." He states that the current hiring situation at Monmouth, and the prevalence of part-time and full time non tenure track positions, is the result of a deal brokered between the faculty and administration during this period. He actually resigned as union leader over the faculty's vote to allow this

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tiered and often capricious system. Donahue laughingly notes that he is used to people disagreeing with him, though, because he is politically far to the left. In fact, he identifies as a communist—his politics are discussed at several points in the interview. He does not feel that anyone on campus ever treated him differently because of his political views, however. On acceptance and tolerance at Monmouth, Donahue notes that the History Department was particularly forward thinking and progressive in general—although, while he recalls a few women colleagues, he laments that they should have done more to hire minorities. He discusses a past Department Chair, Charlie Mays, at several points throughout the interview, praising a symposia series organized by Mays and the Department to bring speakers to Monmouth to stimulate intellectual life on campus.

While Monmouth had a reputation as a “country club” when he first arrived, Donahue notes that the student body became increasingly diverse over his decades on campus. He recalls student activism related to the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. A large number of students participated in a strike over the war in 1970, in fact, although Donahue laughs that he is not sure how many were truly trying to engender change and how many just liked the excuse to skip class! As an informal advisor to student activists, Donahue says that he learned much from them, as well. Unfortunately, he thinks the excitement of those days has disappeared, saying, “the hope of the 60s, the optimism of the 70s, is gone.” He feels that people are more apathetic, especially since the draft went away. He thinks people are resigned to the fact that they cannot make a difference because relatively few political actors in this country hold all the power.

Some of Mr. Donahue’s favorite classes to teach were German History and modern European History. He even notes that he enjoyed teaching Western Civ. He always felt free to say what he wanted in the classroom, and he often tried to be provocative to elicit a reaction

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from his students. He taught the first ever Holocaust class at Monmouth, which was a “painful” experience for him because of the subject matter.

Despite the passage of years, Mr. Donahue still meets a group of retired Monmouth faculty on the first Tuesday of each month for breakfast.