

**University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Student Protest Reunion Oral History Project**

Interviewee: Paul Schroeder

Interviewer: Jessica Ballard

October 3, 2019

Length: 00:15:12

Jessica Ballard: Today is October 3. We are at the Student Life and Culture Archives. My name is Jessica Ballard, and I am here with Paul Schroeder. So thank you very much for agreeing to do an interview with us. So can you please state your name in the years you were at UIUC?

Paul Schroeder: Right. It's Paul Schroeder, and I was here from the fall of '64 until I graduated in the spring of '68.

JB: Okay. And how did you become involved in student protests or activism? And can you talk a little bit about that path?

PS: Sure, when I came to school here, I was a accounting major in the business school, and had a pretty—well, had an idea of what direction I was going to be going here. But within my first semester, I realized that accounting really wasn't my future, and I transferred to LAS, and in LAS—I'm just giving you a step-by-step. In LAS, I ended up majoring in political science, which was an appropriate major, I think, for me, and I enjoyed it.

The—my accounting professor, you know, thought I would be good at, you know, various things, even though I was out of the college of commerce. And he said, 'Why don't you join the board of the Illini Publishing Company?' Which in those days, was the, was—was the, actually the owner of *The Daily Illini* and the *Ilio*, the student radio station. What was it called? W—? I can't remember the technograph, but anyway, the student publications fell under the Illini Publishing Company, and there were four faculty members and two student members. I think they had a student, or four student members. I went on as a junior at the encouragement of my former accounting professor, which was fine, and it was—I had studied hard. I was always a devoted student while I was here, and it was through being a member of the—a student member of the board of the Illini Publishing Company that I got introduced to kind of the core group of student government and DEI—people who were involved, right, which I hadn't been involved.

So I started getting involved, and then through the—through getting to know the leadership of the student senate, I served on several senate committees, even though I wasn't a student senator, that were evaluating, like, University policies related to students. So my entry into advocacy or activism—which I've pretty much maintained my whole life—started with educational reform coming out of student government. The—and that kind of, that kind of culminated in the spring of '68, which is when I

graduated, with this ad hoc committee on educational reform, which was a coalition of people coming from lots of different departments who were taking the the notion of institutional reform right into the University, you know. So we're looking at the University rather than looking at the the war, mainly, which was the major issue.

But of course, the war affected all of us. The draft affected all of us, and at that time, you know, I started paying attention to the voices that were being raised against the Vietnam War. So during that period, I also personally attained a commitment that I wasn't going to go into the military and that I was going to be part of the resistance to the Vietnam War. And although that resistance sort of manifest itself after I left here, that's when I decided to do that. So that's kind of the course of, course of things that led me from being a very diligent accounting major, to being a person who was involved in challenging the University.

JB: Great. So what forms of student activism were you involved in at UIUC?

PS: Well, I outlined, you know, I outlined the basic profile. But I would say that, you know, the educational reform issues were my primary occupation. When I was a senior, I was the director of a program called Freshman Seminar. And Freshman Seminar was a program that had existed under Student Senate. And it was like, a smallish, 20 to 30 people program that that kind of cultivated future student leaders to be part of student government. But the student senate when, and the president of the student senate, when I was a junior, decided, well, we're going to do something different. We're going to make it a more kind of academically oriented project.

So we recruited during the summer incoming freshmen to submit essays and apply to be part of this freshman seminar. We chose 100 freshmen, and what we did is we divided them up into like, six groups or eight groups, I have the documents somewhere, and each group had its own leader, and they went and, like, visited professors in their homes or in their offices, and they got to know the University as a as a more personable setting than just the classroom setting, right. So Freshman Seminar, I don't think it ever—I don't think that it existed after that year, but that's what we did, and that's what I did when I was a—that was one of my activities as a senior.

But that also, and we're looking a little bit past the University now, that brought me into contact with Heinz von Foerster, who was the leader of the Biological Computer Lab, and my connection with Heinz von Foerster and people who I knew through the BCL, which was not necessarily an activist group of people, it was more like an innovations kind of a group of people. That's really what held me here when I got done with being a draft refuser and doing my two years of alternative military service, and I landed back here for a couple of years, and I was involved with lots of the people who are around Heinz von Foerster, the Biological Computer Lab, Herbert Brün, the experimental music classes and things like that. So, so, all of those things I participated in as a, as an informal community member, but, but those are the kinds of things I was in.

JB: So, how did your family and friends feel about your activist activities?

PS: [Clears throat.] Um, uh, this is where things you know, get difficult. You know, personally. My, I would say that coming out very publicly as a, with an alternative voice—which I was most public because I got the assignment to be the student speaker at the Centennial Convocation in the spring of '68. And this was a very tough assignment, and I had only a couple weeks to get ready for it. But my parents attended, and they were of, kind of two minds about the direction they saw me going. One of them was, you know, we're happy you're being successful at what you do, but my mother especially was of, let's say, a bit more limited horizons as far as what was expected.

And I would say that starting then and then through my draft resistance, and then through my alternative military service, and then through many years of not having a standard job or a career path—I mean, I work for myself, I drove a mail truck here in Champaign County, I remodeled houses, we were on the road, you know, doing manual labor for a while. But before I went back to library school and become a librarian—as our daughter is now, also, with the archives concentration—I was pretty non-directed, and that was really hard on my parents, especially my mother. So I would say that it was, kind of established a lifelong rift between myself and my family that we never actually really got over. Now, as far as my friends, you know, by far, the majority of my friends were, you know, of a similar mind frame about pretty much everything.

JB: And so did—were there any lasting repercussions that came out of your time as a student activist, or changes in thought?

PS: Yeah. I think that changes of thought is a—definitely an important concept. And you know, nobody can really come here without being challenged to have their thinking changed. I mean, that's the definition of what the University should be about. And certainly, I was challenged.

I was just thinking about any repercussions or changes of thought. Well, the first repercussion is, once you get marginalized, it's pretty hard to either want to get back or get back in. So it was really hard for me to come back into a regular, you know, kind of normal career path, which I did through going back to library school, which was 15 years after I graduated from here, I got back to school. On the positive side, something just flashed through my mind, but it's—it's gone away. I can't ask Maisie for some assistance here, but read that to me again, and I'll just, um.

JB: Were there any lasting repercussions that came out of your time as a student activist and—were there any changes in thought?

PS: Right. Okay. So, out of my time as student activist, first of all, I got a couple of very interesting jobs here that that kind of set my mind free from, from, you know, other ways of thinking. I got a job with

Dean Rogers of the liberal arts college during the fall of '70 and early into '71 before I went to Madison to do my alternative service. I did a kind of a community ethnographic survey of the non-University community surrounding Champaign-Urbana, and by doing that, I really immersed myself in all kinds of people's lives and alternatives that opened my eyes to what the, what alternatives there are out there, as well as creating bridges to the University. Because University, he especially was looking for ways to connect with the broader community.

All of these activities. We met—we met here, Maisie and I met here, among other things, we were active with in the '70s, with the efforts to close the old Champaign County Jail, which was a really terrible place. And I had actually been hired to do a study of the jail one summer, and that led to that. So that made a big change. The educational reform piece—I worked for the LAS college again for a little bit on a newsletter about teaching change in the LAS college. So all these things kind of did, did set a new course. My connections with Heinz von Foerster, you know, put me into kind of an alternative intellectual space, which I've, I never left. I'm, you know, still very involved in kind of cultivating that. So, yeah, all of this added together to major awareness changes and life changes.

JB: What advice do you have for, um, current students?

PS: That's part of what we're here this weekend for. Yeah, you know we want, you know, there's going to be this young activist panel first thing in the morning tomorrow, and I think that the wrap up is like, where to go from here? And I certainly want to hear—I've been learning from Anita, you know, like, what the ambiance is here on campus. Anita asked me a similar question in the interview we did. And I guess what I came up with there is about what I'd say now is, you know, figure out what your vision is and follow it and just see where you can go with it, because life is a very unpredictable quantity and and take your vision as far as you can.

JB: Great. So is there anything else that you would like to add?

PS: No, but I think that the Archives is doing the right thing to try to collect these stories and maintain the documentation and, and keep these histories alive. And so thanks for doing everything you're doing over here.

JB: Thank you so much for helping us to increase our records.