

In 1998, Whitworth Today interviewed Bill Robinson

on the occasion of his fifth anniversary at the college. Now that he has completed his first decade at Whitworth's helm, it's time for us to let you hear once again from a man who has, among his many and varied activities, maintained a cordial and productive relationship with all of Whitworth's constituencies; established lasting relationships with students and alumni and attended more student-centered events than the most assiduous parent; encouraged a greater Whitworth presence in the Spokane community and the Pacific Northwest, as well as on the national scene; embarrassed himself repeatedly and hilariously at Orientation Weekend skits; overseen the dramatic improvement of the Whitworth campus; cared about every student he's ever met (and some who haven't even shown up yet); and cemented his place in the pantheon of Whitworth's longest-tenured and most beloved presidents.

Ten Years After: 'Who we are is very important and very good'



Five years ago when we interviewed you for "Whitworth Today," you singled out mission as the best thing about Whitworth and the cost of attending as the most difficult thing. Would you say that that situation remains the same, or would you cite other issues today?

Those are still the big two. With respect to the mission, as long as we're faithful to this combination of spiritual conviction and open intellectual inquiry, the more durable our mission remains. I feel we've been faithful to those two values – the narrow ridge idea; and the longer we walk it, the more confident we become of our balance and the more it becomes a part of our identity. So, I think we have been and we remain very faithful to the mission. As far as the cost is concerned, in the last five years we've increased the amount of financial aid substantially through the growth of our endowed scholarships and through careful financial management. So we've been pretty successful in holding down our net cost to the student, especially if you compare us with other private colleges. But I think we're still too expensive for too many people.

In that interview published in 1998, you emphasized Whitworth's distinctive educational mission of encouraging both Christian conviction and intellectual curiosity and openness. How has that mission – or the environment in which it is carried out – changed over the intervening years?

I'm not sure it has. It's a different world than it was five years ago, and I think that the influence of fundamentalism in the world – the intractable belief that my answer is the only answer – has probably drawn attention to the value of the humility that comes with openness. At the same time, I think that the pressure toward relativism – that all answers are created equal – draws attention to the great doctrines and confessions of faith we uphold.

How do you envision Whitworth changing in the next 10 years in terms of growth, academic strengths, and the college's connection to and role in the community, region, and nation?

I'm not wild about Whitworth growing very much at the undergraduate level. Our level of quality and community would be hard to equal at a significantly larger size. However, I think we probably will see some growth in the graduate programs and programs for nontraditional-age students. So in terms of academic quality, I think we'll continue to be stronger and to be perceived as stronger. Our reputation for quality will continue to rise. We've attracted some really talented faculty members, and we have technological resources and facilities that I never dreamed we would have. By the way, I say that as I look across the campus and see the dome for our new telescope, which is very cool.

Will we become Whitworth University at any point in the foreseeable future?

I honestly don't know right now. I could make a prediction, but that wouldn't do anyone any good. We're gathering information, and we'll be polling the constituencies that will be most directly affected by the decision.

If you could choose any career/job other than the one you have, what would you choose and why?

Like anyone who's ever taken a shower, I've always wanted to be a singer. Or I'd like to be a professional athlete, as long as there was no pressure involved. Either of those would be pretty good. But if you're talking about one within reason, I would say that the two roads not taken for me are Ron Pyle's job (communication-studies professor), which is the road I started down, but as Joseph Heller said in his novel *Something Happened*, something happened. I'm not sure what. So that would be one, and then the other would be some kind of parish ministry. When I'm more serious, I'd say those are the two places where I could picture myself. I mean, of course I'd like to be a ridiculously gifted writer who could sit around and write great novels or do great research and write great textbooks. I've got the ridiculous part down, but I'm still waiting for gifted. ■ Sometime this year I will have been a college president for exactly one-third of my life. I'm 54, and this is my 18th year in this job. I guess this is what I do.

Last year your book, *Leading People from the Middle: The Universal Mission of Heart and Mind*, was published. (Editor's note: The book has received fine reviews and is available on the web at amazon.com and through the Whitworth bookstore.) How has becoming a published author changed your life?

The biggest change has been in our inability to get a car in our garage because of all the boxes of unsold books. Also, I've been asked to speak a lot on topics related to leadership.

What will be the greatest challenge for Whitworth grads of the next few years?

Job opportunities will vary by discipline. For example, right now we see more teaching jobs out there than technology jobs. That could flip in the next five years. Geopolitically, our grads will encounter a very tense world. To whatever extent they carry the kind of inner peace that Whitworth nurtures, our young alumni will feel pressure to lead or pressure to conform or both. People of optimism and hope could be in short supply. The world is going to need the convictions and curiosity of the students we are educating. It will need people with deep service values that emerge from firm foundations of faith.

What role has Bonnie played in your work?

Bonnie has made me so much better a person than I would have been had she not been a part of my life, and that seeps into every role I play. Beyond that, how lucky am I to have someone who loves people as authentically and as indiscriminately as she does, and who is as talented and gracious as she is? She's just great. She's the best college-president's spouse I've ever seen, and that is only a minor part of her identity. Maybe that's why she's so good. She certainly doesn't see herself as Whitworth's "first lady," and that's not how I see her: I see her as my very talented partner who helps me in my work infinitely more than I help her in hers as a musician. She is a lovely person. She so identifies with people, and she is such a great friend to her friends: she's a really good human being.



Two of your kids went to Whitworth, and your youngest is now attending Pepperdine. If Whitworth could purloin something from Pepperdine, what do you think it should be?

The view and the endowment (laughing). Let me think. I love their sophomore-year-abroad program. It's great that they do it in the sophomore year, because that gives the students a couple more years in which they can reflect on that experience, draw on that experience and use that experience as they work on worldview during their junior and senior years. Of course, Pepperdine can also enroll more students by having that requirement. They have a residency requirement like we do, and if we could have a couple hundred of our students abroad every year, we'd have no problem with residential space; we could solve that problem with such a program. It's a great plan.

What has happened in your first decade at Whitworth that you deem most worthy of celebration?

Well, one year my team won the Whitworth Golf Tournament, so that was big. Of course, then the Tikker boys had to start cheating to recapture their dominance, so this year I recruited them and my friend, Shakey (our scorekeeper), to my team. Evidently, this move did not go unnoticed by God, because we had the biggest rainstorm since they had to throw Jonah overboard. ■ What pleases me the most is the sharp rise in our retention and graduation rates. When we succeed with students, all good things follow. I think that the general health of the college is most worthy of celebration. I mean, you look at the campus itself, and that's improved, and you look at the student body, and it's getting better all the time; our salaries have risen significantly, and I think that the general mood of the campus is better than it was in 1993. I guess that generally, I'd just say that we can celebrate being a very healthy, thriving institution.

■ Personally, having daughter Brenna and son Ben become graduates of Whitworth also makes me want to celebrate. ■ I think that over the past 10 years, Whitworth has come to the recognition that who we are is very important and very good. I don't think that who we are is all that much different now than it was 10 years ago. But how we feel about who we are, and the role we see for ourselves, might be quite different. I think the reason for all this is because we've tried to be faithful to our callings as educators and as followers of Christ.

What has surprised you most?

I didn't think when I arrived that we would have made this much progress on the physical plant in a decade. That's still amazing to me. I took Annette Weyerhaeuser on a campus tour a few days ago, and she just kept saying, "Dave would have been so thrilled to see this." We're thrilled that Dave would have been thrilled! I knew we'd be better; I thought when I came to Whitworth that I could help this be a better college – that's what I'd been prepared to do – but the developments have surpassed my expectations, and people's appreciation for my role in it has also been surprising, much more than I expected, or deserve, for that matter. I don't know if I'm surprised at the way thousands of people have stepped forward to provide great financial support for Whitworth, but I'm impressed and grateful. People who love and support this college made a \$60-million campaign a success. That's amazing!



What do you spend most of your time on?

That's a good question. It's rather scary that I'm not too sure. I know I'm very busy doing something. It seems like I do a lot of desk work/writing and a lot of speaking. I should probably spend more time listening, saying "Thank you" and asking folks to support us financially. Now that I've been here for a while, there are more things folks want me to do than used to be the case. So we're trying to be smart about where I spend my time.

You have been diligent about hiring around Whitworth's mission and meeting with all new faculty and administration hires. Why is that important to you?

One of Whitworth's most important distinctives, particularly when we compare ourselves to schools affiliated with mainline denominations, is that we go beyond requiring our people to support our mission. We hold the unusual, and perhaps audacious, expectation that our people will embody our mission. In other words, we want a faculty member to be able to say, "Not only am I an expert in my discipline, but it is my mission to honor God, follow Christ and serve humanity." The subtle difference between supporting a mission and claiming a mission is huge.

One of the leader's tasks is to prepare an institution for his or her departure. What are you doing to make that transition both positive and relatively painless for Whitworth?

I haven't started to think about that. Right now, I have enough to worry about just keeping my job without worrying about my exit. Frankly, I'm not at all nervous about the campus community's transition. The people here know the huge extent to which they are responsible for the accomplishments of the last decade and they have a realistic view of my role. Neither they nor I would deny that I've made a contribution, but we all know that Whitworth's greatness is centered in what happens in student lives. That will continue long after I'm gone. Whitworth has an all-star team of faculty and staff. Virtually everything in the operations and teaching at Whitworth will go unaffected by my exit. Further, the campus excitement over new leadership with new strengths will make the transition smooth. I confess to being a little more concerned with our off-campus constituencies who might overconnect our progress to me. We have some demythologizing to do with those groups.

What do you think Whitworth will look like when its next leader arrives? What gives you confidence about the college's future?

It will look great, and I don't want to talk anymore about my departure (laughing). I'm not planning on going anywhere – unless you know something I don't know!

What's will be your favorite/best/most important legacy to Whitworth?

I suspect my most enduring legacy will be thousands of alumni who love Whitworth College and will never allow their alma mater to be less than what they experienced while we were here together. ■