

## **"A Conversation with Robert Rutford" (Transcript)**

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Multipurpose Building

Office of Communications, UT Dallas

Host: Brandon V. Webb, Communications Manager

Question: Greetings, and welcome to *A Conversation with...* our Distinguished President *Emeritus* Dr. Robert Rutford. Dr. Rutford is an Antarctic explorer and scientist of international acclaim, having been recognized with the naming of the Rutford Ice Stream and Mount Rutford in Antarctica, and here at home locally on the campus of UT Dallas one can drive along Rutford Avenue in his honor. He served with distinction as the president of UT Dallas through a very formative period during the University's 40 year history, 1982-1994. Thanks for being here, Dr. Rutford.

Rutford: Thanks for inviting me, Brandon.

Question: To start off, I don't get many Antarctic explorers behind that microphone, nor emeritus university presidents. It got me wondering, which is tougher?

Rutford: Well, two very different kinds of tasks. The business in Antarctica is physically and mentally exhausting at times and because you're at the mercy of the weather and the US Navy, who flew the airplanes and got you around, and because we worked inland, the only way we could get there was by ski equipped C-130 aircraft. If there were other demands on the aircraft, you were continually fighting to try to get air time.

The president time was quite different because you're dealing with a totally different group of people, politicians and business people who are their own bosses as opposed to dealing with a Navy captain who has got to report to an admiral. So, quite different, but in both cases, very rewarding.

Question: According to the American Council on Education, the average tenure of an American university president was about 8.5 years back in 2006, up from only 6 years, 20 years earlier, back in 1986. Now you served 12, and it's such a demanding position and you presided over some rather momentous changes for this young university, how did you manage to do that for so long?

Rutford: We had great people here at the University to work with, Alex Clark, Stew Fallis, and Priscilla Beal and Scherry Johnson, who was my staff and the people in Austin-This was when Hans Mark was the Chancellor of the University System. Jim Duncan was the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and they were easy to work with and they saw the potential of the University of Texas at Dallas. We maybe got a little more attention than we otherwise might have. It was just a fun time.

Question: I'm sure among your colleagues, especially in this part of the state, you saw presidents come and go regularly.

Rutford: I think there is a tendency in the UT System that 10 or 12 years is about the time that it's just time to go.

Brandon: Some of the highlights of your tenure at the helm include steady increase in enrollment, a pitched and ultimately successful battle to establish an engineering school here, and then build a building for it, the first on-campus housing, and the admission of freshmen and sophomores in the fall of 1990. We'll talk about these more in detail, but overall, paint the picture for us of UT Dallas when you arrived and what did you know about the university before you got here?

Rutford: Well I knew a little bit about the university. Before I got here because Marty Halpern, who had been in the Geosciences department, was an Antarctic guy also, and we had talked about this a little bit. It was known because of the history with TI as a very unique place that started as a PhD university and built its way down, instead of starting as an undergraduate university and building its way up. So, I knew a little bit about it. I visited here a couple times in the interview process. So, when I got here, I don't know if I told you, if you went out at lunch, today if you go out walk across the campus at noon there's a whole bunch of different people of different descriptions and dressing and all sorts of things, in 1982 when I came here if you walked across the campus at noon, you might meet 3 or 4 other people because the greatest number of classes were held after 5. It was very much a commuter university because there was no housing.

Really the only full time students during the day were PhD students, and they were brown-bagging it and eating in the lab or at their desk. So during the daytime that it was very quiet. That causes some problems. We got a lot of heat from the coordinating board because our classes were empty between 8:00 in the morning 5:00 at night, and one day we had plotted this and had a graph of it, and a graph for several other universities. It dawned on me that if you took the graph for UT Austin and just turned it over and laid it down on top of ours, the fit was almost perfect because their classes were half-empty or less from noon until 8:00 at night. So, they were not using their classrooms any more than we were, but they were using it in a traditional way and we, our pattern, was non-traditional and very hard for people to accept. When we showed them the picture of the two graphs, we heard very little more about this classroom utilization. So it was just—coming from a big land grant institution, from Nebraska, and earlier as a student at Minnesota, it is a very different environment...very dedicated people. Research, research, research was the focus.

Question: When you had that conversation with yourself that only someone looking to accept a job can do ultimately it comes down to you and your own decision, what was it that pushed you over the edge to decide, because you left a very nice, profile position where you were and you came and took this great opportunity here. But how did the conversation in your mind go when you thought about this opportunity?

Rutford: (laughing) Want me to be very honest? I was going to leave Nebraska. I was an interim chancellor at Nebraska, and the original 5 finalists were rejected by the regents, and so the 2 local candidates, Martin Massengale, who was a good friend of mine, and myself became the 2 candidates—as a result of the others. When Martin got the job, I was going to leave. So, I was looking and had interviewed at several universities, but the uniqueness of this place and the

opportunity. When you came here then, you interviewed with Erik Jonsson and Cecil Green and the local people here. I mean, it was clear that this place had fantastic backing from the community, and not just from the local Richardson community, but from downtown as well. So I just saw it as a wonderful opportunity to become a university president. I was very happy when I was named.

Question: As if you didn't have enough to do getting to know your position here as university president, as early as 1983, shortly after your presidency began, the real push then was on to create the engineering program at UT Dallas. It would be 2 years before the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board would give the go ahead, in 1985, after a lot of talk that the chances for an engineering school looked slim early on. Tell me a little bit about the head winds and the early challenges that you faced with this idea of an engineering school at UT Dallas.

Rutford: The initial push for the engineering school actually began before I got here. There was a famous regent at the University of Texas- had promised Erik Jonsson—in the late 1970s—that UT Dallas would get engineering and he then had died. There was no record of this conversation. Bryce Jordan, who was then the president, and Stew Fallis who was the vice president for business affairs, put together a proposal for a full blown engineering school with civil, mechanical, electrical and that was submitted and had no hope of going any place. It was withdrawn finally. I'm not sure if the regents approved it. But at least it never went to the board, probably informal talks were held with coordinating board staff and it was pulled back with the idea that you were trying to bite off too much. Stew Fallis had been ill and came back as kind of a special assistant and he knew everybody in the community.

He went around and talked to people and he put together a group of 5 individuals representing TI, E Systems, Rockwell, and Northern Telecom-and so they would sit around and shoot the breeze. A couple of them were VPs for research at those institutions, and they talked to the community. The community said we don't need mechanical and civil engineering. We need electrical engineering. We put together a proposal for electrical engineering only, part of that process we had the National Educational Research Center based in Denver-they came down and did an independent interview with all of the companies in Richardson and around the neighborhood-confirmed that what the community wanted was a school of electrical engineering. We re-did the proposal and submitted it. The regents approved it, it went to the coordinating board. Just about that time Hans Mark came in as the chancellor. He said he'd like to review it. So, they pulled it back from the coordinating board, and he looked at it.

He had contacts with a number of people and so he had an independent group of three guys come in, all of them members of the National Academy of Engineering and well known individuals, who looked at the proposal and made some suggestions. But they basically endorsed it. Then it went back to the coordinating board. You know it was touch and go, but they said, "Well you know, there's an engineering school at Arlington." The guys at TI said, "That's fine. But we're an hour and a half from Arlington in 5:00 traffic."

Well, it was kind of, you know, they said, "well..." mumbled and grumbled, and what happened was, that Kent Black, who was the president of Rockwell International here in Richardson... on Thursday morning I was to go get my car washed, and he was a driver and would go get Kent's driver and he would bring Kent's car down. And we got to talking, and I said, "Richard, how long, you drive all over the city. You take Kent out to Bell Helicopter, and all over, and Irving and Arlington.

How long does it take to drive from Rockwell, which is just a little bit north of TI to UT Arlington?" He said, "I can draw you a time map, not a mileage map. I'll draw you a time map as to how long it takes to go from A to B at various times in the day. And so that was kind of a freelance sort of a deal. But the thing that probably was the tie breaker was that we got a couple of members of the coordinating board up here. Kent Black arranged for a helicopter at 5 o'clock and flew them over, down, we didn't have George Bush in those days. Everything was either on LBJ or 35 going down and across 30 and 20 to Arlington. These guys got a look at what the bumper to bumper traffic was like.

They began to realize that when you had TI with at about that time with about 17,000 employees and Rockwell with 10 and Fujitsu and all these other firms in what was then called the Telecom Corridor, that there was a real market and a chance to start an engineering school in electrical engineering. So, they finally approved it, but with no money. Part of the approval was that we had to show, the university system had to show...we had to have about \$54 million dollars in hand before we could start. So, we raised from the local community about, the Excellence in Education Foundation gave \$12 million, the local industry gave \$12 million. The regents put up some cash, and also a building and stuff, which counted.

So, we were allowed to start. Basically, we built an engineering school with no state tax dollar support. That's the history of the School of Engineering. It was not an easy fight.

Question: Where did the legislature and the governor specifically, where did they come down on this issue?

Rutford: That particular decision never got to the legislature because adding new courses and that sort of business is a coordinating board deal. When we came to add freshman and sophomores, the university was created by a legislation which prohibited freshmen and sophomores. So that decision had to go to the legislature and the governor's approval. We had the local legislators who were very supportive of the engineering school, and some of whom are still around.

Question: What goes through your mind now, nearly 25 years after the fact, this Herculean task of getting an engineering school here? When you look over at those two buildings along Rutford Avenue here on campus, what goes through you mind?

Rutford: It's kind of a, makes me, certainly proud of the fact that we were able to pull it off. You noticed I said we because there's a whole bunch of people that deserve a ton of credit as to how it happened. Certainly people like Kent Black and Ed Castile, and I could just go down a whole list of industry people who visited the coordinating board members, who lobbied strongly, who were very active in, you know there were two reports that were done. One when Starke Taylor was mayor, he established a lay committee of people to look at engineering education in the Dallas Metroplex and that was chaired by Bill Moore, a fellow who is still in business and he's got an office over in Las Colinas. He chaired part of that, and Kent Black chaired the part on engineering. When that report was done and issued, it called specifically for greater engineering without specifically identifying UT Dallas.

It simply was a survey for what was needed for higher education in the Dallas area. Then Mark Sheppard who was president of Texas Instruments, he organized a committee. But Mark, he...he was something else. So he got all these guys in from Fort Worth as well. We had the head of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce and the guy who was the head of the company

that owns Radio Shack—Tandy, I guess. He got us all in a room over at TI, and he said, "Now we're going to do this report." Jim Fisher, who was one of his right hand guys, was going to be the person who is going to write it and make sure it gets done. "If you don't think that you can sign it when it's done, you should leave right now."

So, that was, well, when it got down to the very end the Fort Worth people started to drag their feet and wanted to change a whole bunch of stuff. My position was that we had all agreed that when Jim was done and the basics were written that we were all going to sign it. We had a pretty tense time for a week or two, and it finally was signed. That was used with great emphasis because here were the industry guys saying we needed this school. The fact that they put their money where their mouth was, was most interesting, and that certainly had a big impact also.

Question: You talked about how, in the early days of your time here in UT Dallas, when you'd go to campus, it was very much a commuter campus. You might bump into a few people during say the normal 8-5 type hours. But as that transition began to happen where campus housing came about, I wondered if you could tell me just some of your thoughts about how that came about and how it really sort of changed the campus.

Rutford: The housing initially was strictly for graduate students because the graduate students were the largest, most important pieces of the student body, the initial effort was to provide some low cost housing for graduate students who might be married have families. So the first initial group of the student housing was aimed at them.

Question: In one of the first newspaper articles I ran across about your first speech as president, you mention that UT Dallas was different from where you had been at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln because you were accustomed to being surrounded by undergraduates at all levels, UT Dallas freshmen and sophomores weren't added to the student body until the fall of 1990. Why the long gap there?

Rutford: There was a great deal of opposition to the freshmen and sophomore addition. You had Richland College. You had a new Collin County Community College, SMU and UT Arlington and other four-year universities, North Texas. There was no great enthusiasm for UT Dallas to add freshmen and sophomores. However, there were a couple of guys in Dallas who basically said to me, "We're going to go after freshmen and sophomores." These were non-university types, Jess Hay and Peter O'Donnell. They said, "We'll carry the mail." I said, "Look, we just got this engineering thing and everybody's tired. We need to let the dust settle." They said, "No let's strike while the iron is hot." The local legislators introduced the bills, and what happened immediately, all of the upper-division schools like Tyler and San Antonio, they all wanted in on this bill also. So their local legislators added their names to the bill. It died. It disappeared. That summer there was a special session of the legislature for the budget and the bill for UT Dallas re-emerged and was passed in that special summer session.

Gov. Clements signed it, and we were off and running. *Again*, with no funding from the state. So Pat Webber, who was then a vice president at TI and head of our development board here at UT Dallas, he and Scherry Johnson, in a very short period of time raised about \$3 million. The building we're in right now was provided by the state, this part of the building, Multipurpose, was built as the first home for the College of Engineering. The other half was built as administration. So, the money, the \$3 million was used for, we didn't have any library books or labs for freshmen, big labs for freshmen classes. So, here in this building and just down below and at

the end of the hall is a big biology lab, a chemistry lab, the geology lab, engineering labs. This building was basically, at that time, had basically become a lab building with offices for the engineering faculty just across the hall from us here.

We hired a dean and he hired the faculty, and this was all hired for the school of engineering on soft money. The same for the freshmen and sophomores. We recruited the first class of freshmen, and we were pretty stupid. We didn't really stop to think about why were these very bright kids coming to UTD. The bottom line was, after we finally woke up, they were coming to UTD because they couldn't afford to go to Harvard or Yale, or wherever. They were really bright kids. Without really thinking, our advisors, and certainly I'm as guilty as anybody, we signed these kids up for 16 hours of class, and then later found out that half of them were working 25 or 30 hours a week. Another interesting thing we found out, and I worry about this still, in those days a kid could complete the required courses to graduate by the end of their junior year. So a lot of kids just took basket weaving and other non-academic type courses their senior year. So basically, for about a year, nobody had been, they hadn't had to read or do math or calculus.

We signed them all up for calculus. One kid told me, "I walked into a history class the first day and the teacher assigned a 700 page reading for the first two weeks. I didn't read 700 pages in 3 years I was in high school." That first semester was a disaster. We learned a lot. We got them charged up again, and we kind of got a slap from some of the local folks because we basically gave them, let that semester disappear. I think it was the only fair things to do and was approved by everybody. It wasn't something that was done in the dark. It was done openly, and we took the heat for it. We just made a mistake.

Question: In a practical sense, adding freshmen and sophomores changed the look of your walk across campus, didn't it?

Rutford: Not initially because there were so few of them, but for people who have been gone from here for 5 years, all of a sudden there are young ladies and young guys playing Frisbee in the mall. It was something that you didn't see before. It changed and changed the university and all of a sudden you had freshmen and sophomores, and what's the next thing that comes? Fraternities and sororities, and various other groups on campus that's just kind part of the environment. I walked through the union today and I see the students, one of the sororities or fraternities selling stuff or doing things for service projects. That's what a university is all about. It's easy to say that your education is dependent upon the faculty, but a lot of your education is dependent upon the people that you go to class with, that you grow up with, if you're going to change your ideas a little bit, the input from your peers is essential. Many of our Alums have done very well as represented a diverse group that has graduated from here.

Question: You were president for more than a decade, 12 years in fact, and you've been a treasure on campus now for nearly 30 years, most recently as president emeritus. Looking back over back over nearly 3 decades now, what has your time here meant to you?

Rutford: In a certain sense, I feel like this is my university because, and I say that without wanting to sound egotistical, but the character of this university that you see today, it really was developed in those 10 or 12 years. The School of Management, which is now very large and so on, was really getting growing and beginning to make international contacts. We had classes in Beijing, China, classes in Russia. We still have in St. Petersburg a , very very close tie where we helped them start at School of Management. The Engineering school, which is now the second largest unit on campus, and the housing, I just look at all the housing, I told my wife the

other day, "Look at that, when we did that first one, I had no idea!" It's crowned by that dormitory at the end of the street. I just look at it and think it was fun, it was hard work, but look at what happened.

Question: It brings you to campus nearly every day still? This love?

Rutford: I'm trying to shed all of the paraphernalia that you acquire over the years, and the books and papers, and it's painful. You look at these papers and it brings back thoughts of, "Gee-whiz, I remember that day and that meeting..." There's a copy of it in the files in here, you end up throwing it away.

Question: You've clearly left an indelible and positive mark on the campus and continue to serve the university. What is next for Antarctic explorer and President Emeritus Rutford?

Rutford: Well, I'm winding down. I'm tired. We live here, and our kids: one's in Chicago, one's in Lincoln and one is in Jackson, Wyoming. We see the one in Jackson, Wyoming because we spend our summers there. We're just trying to get to a point where we can have a little more flexibility. I'm chairman of the board of trustees of a foundation, the Geological Society of America Foundation. So, there's enough to keep me out of trouble, and my wife doesn't want me around all the time. Have to have some place to hide.

Question: Dr. Rutford, it's an honor to visit with you sir. I've very much enjoyed the time and the exchanges that we've had over the last several weeks have been meaningful to me, and greatly informative. I do appreciate you joining us today.

Rutford: Thank you for having me, and I hope that it works out and some people will listen to it sometime in the future.

Host: This has been A Conversation With... UT Dallas President Emeritus, Dr. Robert Rutford, brought to you by The University of Texas at Dallas and the Office of Communications. To find out more about the university, our special guests, or 40 years of UT Dallas history visit us on the web at [utdallas.edu](http://utdallas.edu). UT Dallas...creating the future, since 1969. Until the next Conversation with..., I'm Brandon Webb. Be well. (music out)