Barrett Oral History Project
Interview with President Michael Crow
01 February 2019, 8:30 AM, Fulton Foundation Building
Primary Interviewers: Emma VandenEinde and Joshua Pardhe
Notetaker: Primrose Dzenga

VandenEinde: Hi, I'm Emma VandenEinde, this is Joshua Pardhe and Primrose Dzenga interviewing President Michael Crow on February 1st at 8:30 a.m. in the Fulton Foundation Room. This interview is part of the Barrett Oral History Project and our goal is to preserve a record of Barrett's history in honor of Barrett's 30th Anniversary as the oldest honor college in the nation. So, thank you so much for sitting down and taking some time to answer our questions. We have six questions prepared, and we're looking forward to your in-depth answers.

Crow: Okay. Well let me…let me say something about Honors Colleges, so this is something that…that people don't realize and so…Barrett, the Honors College at ASU is a fantastic, fantastic institution. It has created a teaching, learning and discovery environment that's equal to any environment that's out there, but…what people don't realize, where I came from---Columbia University has at the heart of Columbia University a thing called Columbia College. Columbia College is the entity that's then connected to Harvard College, at Harvard University; Yale College, at Yale University; and so people don't realize that those are Honors Colleges. They're the same model, but at a different kind of historical institution and so what I mean by that is that Barrett Honors College, Columbia College, Harvard College, Yale College….they are the same kind of place and I'm….what I'm very proud of in our case is our level of diversity, the number of intellectual pursuits that our students can take the number of double and triple majors at…some of those Honors Colleges, the ivy league ones in particular, you only have a handful of majors that you can pursue. Here, our students can take hundreds of different options and mixing and matching…

VandenEinde: And not just on this campus.

Crow: Right. Anywhere! Right.

VandenEinde: I know, I'm from the Downtown campus, and Joshua…he takes most of his classes here, but he lives around the West Campus area.

Crow: Right. So…I mean, I just wanted to get that out there, that people don't realize that what we've done here in the last 30 years, is built a modern, hyper-intellectually broad Honors College on the same fundamental basis as the idea of Harvard College or Columbia College but on a much broader spectrum with a very diverse student body and at a very large scale.

VandenEinde: Yeah. Going back a little bit…I guess this kind of relates to your point that you just made. I just wanted to kind of get your own opinion. Why do you think an Honors College is important for students?

Crow: So I have a different view about Honors Colleges, so Honors Colleges to me are a highly-designed learning environment, for students with a particular approach to learning. So I'm not a big believer that somehow Honors Colleges are something in which…"medaled" -- that is, they Olympic-medaled -- high school students are coming in to get further Olympic medals in college, it's a place where a kid who is interested in operatic singing can also double major in biomedical engineering and pick up Arabic as a side language because that's the way they learn. Now I was one of those kids. I wanted to major in five different subjects simultaneously. So I wanted to be…I wanted to study political science, I wanted to study environmental science, I wanted to study engineering, linguistics and anthropology.

VandenEinde: Wow.

Crow: And so when I showed up to the university that I went to, I said I wanted to major in these five things and they said, "No, little boy. You have to pick one." And I said "I can't do that." And they said "Okay so you're in Distributed Studies." And they said "Distributed Studies is for the stupid little boys like you who can't decide what they want to do." And so what I think our Honors College is, is a place for highly-energized individuals on two dimensions. One dimension is the English major who is already a poet who wants to devote every ounce of their energy to their creative expression and wants to be overwhelmed with all of the complexity of English poetry. The other is the student -- and it [the first dimension] could be true in physics, in chemistry, or engineering or whatever -- and the other is this person, who wants to be completely immersed in the totality of learning without distraction, without constraint, and that's to me what an Honors College is all about and that's what Barrett is about. Now the same equally capable kid may say, "You know, I just want to study chemical engineering and work at my dad's company." And fine. Or, you know, "What I really want to do is keep playing in my band, and I wanna get a degree in business communications, you know, I just wanna get the what I call the "Mini Maxs." So Honors College students are what I call "Maxi Maxs." So the maximum amount of the maximum effort. And then a lot of people…and it is rational, by the way, to be Mini Maxs. The minimum amount of the maximum effort. And so we need an environment for the Maxi Maxes. And so Barrett is a place where Maxi Maxes go.

VandenEinde: I love that vocabulary word. So now we're going to jump a little bit more into the history. So you became president in 2002.

Crow: Before you were born.

VandenEinde: *laughs* Well, we were one or two…And it seems that one of your priorities was heavily developing and investing in Honors College, and…

Crow: Yes.

VandenEinde: ….transforming it into what is now called the Gold Standard of Honors Colleges…

Crow: …and a residential college, which didn't exist before, with its own facilities and its own connections in new ways, so those were decisions that we made, yes.

VandenEinde: True. So going a little bit more into that, could you share more about the development of the Barrett Honor College and some specific initiatives that helped create it?

Crow: So its creation back in the 80s was really derivative of the emergence of ASU as a real university. So, ASU didn't become a comprehensive opportunity to build a university…it didn't become a university even as a starting position until 1960. Didn't even begin the process of becoming a research university until 1980. And President Nelson was here, he had been the chancellor of the University of Colorado at Boulder, and he was the person that said, "Well, we need a place where these Maxi Max learners can go so let's get something started." And so 30 years in the…in the context of university history is like a nanosecond ago, you know, Harvard's almost 400 years old, Oxford and Cambridge are in the range of 1000 years old, and Barrett Honors College is 30 years old so that's a…a nanosecond. And so what was going on here was we were finding that there were really large numbers of students who were the same as the students at Harvard College, the same as the students at Stanford, but generally not from as many from ultra-wealthy families.

And so what was being created here was an opportunity to create that kind of college in Arizona, so it was the brillance of the team at the time to launch this fantastic idea of an Honors College, which then has evolved at 10 times the normal speed of an academic enterprise, cuz they don't evolve very quickly, so we've done 300 years of evolution in 30 years, and have ended up, as you have already suggested as the best of the best of the best.

Pardhe: After you became president in 2002, one of your first high-profile outside hires was Dean Jacobs, who is now one of the longest serving deans here at ASU.

Crow: Probably in history of the institution also.

Pardhe: He came from one of the top liberal arts colleges --

Crow: Swarthmore College, yeah.

Pardhe: Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, so would you mind sharing how hiring him fit into your plans for both ASU and Barrett?

Crow: So what we're looking for with Barrett was…I wanted to find a person where she or he could come from one of these Honors Colleges, public or private, I think I probably preferred private, to just get every ounce of the ideas out of that institution. So Mark was a chaired professor, he was the centennial professor of Biology at Swarthmore College, he was the associate Provost at Swarthmore College. We interviewed him and he knew exactly what we were trying to do. How do you build a world-class Honors College like Swarthmore, which we have, but inside a University with 400 majors? 400 degree pathways? Nothing like that could ever be done. I used to be a trustee of a college like Swarthmore called Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. And…same thing. So there they had a few dozen majors, they had a few

hundred students in the freshman class, and so what Mark was really interested in, and this is why we focused on him, and he's done a fantastic job as the Dean, it was how do we build the super super super super Swarthmore? The super super super Williams, Amherst, Bowdoin, Oberlin--where my wife went to college… Claremont, Pomona, Grinnell, whatever the school happens to be. How do we build one of those inside ASU and then take advantage of the entirety of the University? And Mark wanted to do that and has done that.

VandenEinde: One of my questions that is always my favorite one to ask in these types of interviews…what is one of your best memories or stories that you have from the history of Barrett?

Crow: Well I've had a lot of Barrett students in my classes that I teach.

VandenEinde: What classes do you teach?

Crow: The most common class that I teach is a class called Science and Technology and Public Affairs which is a science and technology and policy class which…

VandenEinde: …which fits your desires that you wanted…

Crow: Yeah. Right.

VandenEinde: ….when you were in school.

Crow: Well anyway, so it does. And so…exactly. And so the students that are in there this semester or last year or the year before… what I find in the Barrett students is this unbridled willingness to engage in intellectual discourse at the highest level. In fact, within this university community, including in that class, which is three-quarters graduate students, they are unequivocally and always the most courageous, always the ones trying to learn across the

broadest spectrum of learning, always double majors, triple majors, multilingual, multifunctional, a piano player, concert piano master, drum major. You know, mashed in with economics and philosophy and I'm like, "And now we got something to talk about." And so what I find in the course and the way that it works is that they are always the ones driving the hardest, and so my remembrance of the Honors College is my engagement with Honors students. Now I've also been on Honors Thesis committees. And reviews. And so one of my students who took my class who then did an Honors Thesis who then finished her Ph. D. in like 6 months here, who's now at Stanford Law School on a full-ride scholarship… I'm just like, dude, I mean… [*all laugh*] I could only wish that I had half of your ability! And so I've also met people coming through the Honors College who are unparallel so, there was an Honors College graduate from, I think the early 2000s named Matthew Desmond, I don't know if you guys track him, so he's a local kid from Arizona. So he grew up near Winslow, Arizona. So he now is a full professor at Princeton and an endowed chair, I think he's like 35 years old.

VandenEinde: Geez.

Crow: But last year he won the Pulitzer prize, and a MacArthur Genius award.

VandenEinde, **Pardhe**: Wow.

Crow: I'm like, "Yeah. That's what Barrett produces." Absolutely.

VandenEinde: Do you have a favorite thesis project that you oversaw?

Crow: Well, I mean, the most exciting projects that I've been involved with Barrett is … when I was at Columbia, we could give A+s. And so I gave A+s to students that taught me. So the condition to get an A+ was, did you teach me? Did I learn from you as a student? If I learned

from you as a student, I didn't even care how you did on a test, I gave you an A+. I don't care about your paper. If I learned from you and you're that smart, I gave you an A+. And so I've had many A+ experiences with Barrett students, where they're teaching me, where they're bringing in some angle, some perspective, some, some way of thinking, and so I graduated from…I graduated from college 42 years ago. Last year was the year that I learned the most, so I've been in college for 42 years, and so there were Barrett students last year that taught me, even though I had been in college for 42 years. So some 19-year-old kid, with a thousand horsepower brain, tied into the internet dreaming and imagining, so the most powerful human expression is imagination…So if you match that intellect level with imagination in a young person who's fearless about the future, they're going to teach an old person like me all kinds of things. And so my experiences with Barrett students are about learning from them.

Pardhe: Going back to the idea that the Barrett Honors College is a unique learning environment for students, I understand that you attended 17 different schools before you graduated high school.

Crow: No.

Pardhe: So you've experienced….

Crow: The ones I've stayed at longer than two weeks.

Pardhe: Through those experiences, you've found many different ways of approaching education. So how have your unique experiences in grade school helped you form the gold standard of Honors Colleges?

Crow: Well, the first thing that happens when you move around from town to town in working-class communities like I did was that you first had to defend yourself cuz you're going to get beat up and so my hands are covered with the scars of other little boys' teeth. And so battling in every school imaginable, so that's learning also. And then there's adjusting to people that are biased and bigoted and don't like people that look like me or wear the clothes that I wore, or spoke with the accent that I have--I have an accent, and my accent wasn't as popular in Florida or Tennessee. Or Texas, or Maryland, or other places that we lived, Missouri. And so you learn from that also. So learning is not just about your academic ability. So the other thing that I learned in those 17 schools and moving around is the unbelievably and overly rigid educational models that force people to learn in mechanistic ways. And so the French philosopher-writer Foucault basically says, "If you wanted to change education, then look at the seats are nailed to the floor in a classroom." Because then that creates the rigidity of a learning environment. So what I learned growing up was the rigidity of these environments that I was going through … so I'd go from one school in one grade…In the third grade I was in school in California, two different schools, and then in the fourth grade I went to three schools in Metropolitan Chicago. And so what I found in all of those environments -- that's five schools in those two years -- what I found in those two years was then that the teachers were relentless bureaucrats, built on a rigid model of instruction with no, no tolerance for variability whatsoever. And I'm only in the fourth grade, so I'm nine years old. But I can already tell at nine years old that there's something wrong. I don't know what it is. But I do know that, you know, they would-they would say, "Well, you don't know this, what's wrong with you? You don't know this, what's wrong with you?" So I have this joke that I, that I developed over time that I know nothing about the comma or the numeral eight, because somewhere along the way -- I use that as an example, it's not true, I

learned about commas later when I was in college -- but, but somewhere along the way, when I was learning to write and learning to express myself, because I was moving back and forth between all of these teachers, because they could only teach in their rigid way, block by block by block by block, there was no tolerance for anything different. And then what that taught me was, and I think that this is really important, what that taught me was that -- Now imagine there's any disruption at your home. Imagine there's any disruption in your family life, and there's any change. My mother died along the way when I was eight years or nine years old. And so what that means is that…you know, my family at least had money to buy food and pay rent, and think of all the families that don't.

How are you going to learn then in the context of a rigid, regimented, bureaucratic teacher who has little tolerance for any variability in the students, when, in fact it is *in fact* the variability between and among the students that empowers their learning. What we're living in now is, in fact, a strange, industrialized model. In fact, I began in all the schools that I went to, to think of it as nothing but a factory. And so then what would happen from time to time, I would occasionally meet a teacher and they would say, "Oh. I see. You're not like the rest of us here." And so they would let me do my own thing. So when I went to one school in the 10th grade -- I moved around a lot in the 10th grade because my dad had gotten out of the Navy, didn't have a job, we were living in Missouri, living in Maryland, living in Illinois, moving all over the place, trying to make things happen -- the one biology teacher, who was a genius teacher, he said, "Oh, Michael, I'm going to give you some mice. And you're going to just do some experiments. I want you to figure out how to design an experiment and do some experiments on mice." So I started reading everything, and so I did these experiments about dark and light, and mice and eating and weight gain and other stuff. I started designing an experiment, doing an experiment, and I was learning

biology and learning behavior, learning organisms and all this other kind of stuff, and it was fantastic.

What I found, you know, not to the heart of your question, but tangentially to your question: what I found was that moving around taught me how fundamentally flawed the overall educational process really is. And then that gave me high tolerance for being willing to be creative, to be a part of doing new things. You might notice that we have, you know, thirty trans-disciplinary schools at ASU. We have *anti*-disciplinary schools at ASU. There was a young woman in Barrett that I met a few years ago who had been admitted to Juilliard, you know, supposedly the most exclusive music school in the country. But she didn't want to go to Juilliard, because they wouldn't let her also be a biochemistry major. Well, here you can be, you know, you want to be a biochemistry major while you're studying music? Okay, no problem. And so that's what I would have preferred when I showed up to college. That's what I would prefer today. If I was your age, and just coming to college, I would walk up to the person and I wouldn't say five majors, I would say, "These are the ten things I want to try to learn while I'm here."

VandenEinde: That's amazing.

Crow: "Please customize for me a pathway through this institution, where I can come out with this understanding." Or I would say, "All I want to do is I want to read books." And they would say, "Okay, here's those books." And then when you're done reading those books, now you're a master learner. So we're still not there, but we're closer at ASU than most places.

VandenEinde: Yeah, I mean, I think the Human Event is a really good example.

Crow: Yeah, that class, yeah, right.

VandenEinde: I know -- discussing different books and just having these discussions about the human psyche and how its evolved. So we have one last question for you before we wrap up. Where do you see Barrett in the larger vision of ASU? Because we know that you oversee ASU, but specifically with Barrett, what are your hopes for the future of continued growth at Barrett?

Crow: So one thing I'm hoping for, with Barrett is enhanced diversity, more socio-economic diversity, more ethnic diversity. It's already more diverse than most honors colleges, including the Columbias and the Harvards, and so forth.

But we need more diversity. I'm looking for it to be a place where -- this will sound strange and I'm looking at the Vice Dean [*Nicola Foote*] over there -- like triple majors are common and so, the notion of them thinking through…Now we just did an article on bunch of triple majors here just the other day, and one of them I happen to know and I ran into him last night walking to the…

VandenEinde: Game?

Crow: …the defeat of the University of Arizona game and…

VandenEinde: Forks up!

Crow: Yes, right. And so, and so I was talking to him, and he was kind of interesting. He just said that it's all about, you know, planning and discipline and not thinking about summers off and I'm like "Summers off?" I don't even know what that…when I went to college at age 17, I never went home to live again.

Dzenga: What did you do?

Crow: I had to find jobs, I had to find ways to advance. I took my trunk out of my dad's station wagon and that was it, and move on. And so I'm not saying that that's what every student should do, but when you go to college, you should go to college. You should take the three or four or five years that you're going to be in college and get your three majors or your bachelor's and your masters you know, all at the same time. And so what I'm hopeful that Barrett can demonstrate is, "What would be the highest order master learner that human beings could produce?" and can Barrett produce those?

VandenEinde: That's a daring question. I love that.

Crow: Yes. Yes. I'm looking at the Vice Dean [*Nicola Foote*]over there, sending her signals.

VandenEinde: I know that's really encouraging for me too, because I know I'm on the Downtown campus. I'm a journalism student.

Crow: Yeah.

VandenEinde: I come down here all the time, I'm a part of an acapella group, I'm trying to do music as a minor and Spanish as minor. And so for me, it's just really inspiring.

Crow: You're doing it; you're getting it going. What I'm talking about is exactly what you're doing. So you're doing journalism, you're on multiple campuses, so we built these bus systems and light rail systems.

VandenEinde: I use the shuttle, like, every single day.

Crow: That's what I mean, we did all of that…and so most places would say, most universities that have multiple campuses, you can't go between the campuses. Most universities have different leadership on every campus, and then they fight and argue with each other.

VandenEinde: Which is not how it's supposed to be.

Crow: We don't have any of that. We have one university.

Dzenga: Can I ask one question? You do so many things, like, this is…this University is big. There are so many things, there's athletics, there are other so many things. When do you find the time for Barrett?

Crow: Well, time is -- how long does it take to come up with a brilliant idea? A fraction of a second. So time is a unit that's often misunderstood. People think that time is a function of a constraint. Time is merely a variable. It's merely an element of your existence. And so if you don't…if you master time, and you understand time, and you understand what you're doing, it doesn't even enter your mind. So it's not "Where do I find time?" I don't have to find time; time is not a variable. The variable is, "Where's your energy going?" So more valuable than time is energy. And then, and then there's the immeasurable and the intangible which is creativity. Creativity has nothing to do with time.

Dzenga: You think so?

Crow: Nothing. No, no. The output of your creativity has to do with time. The creativity itself has nothing to do with time. Creativity can be instantaneous, in fact, most often is. Creativity is usually at its highest possible level at the exact moment where you're confronted with either opportunity, pressure, or threat. So the fastest and most creative person is a person attempting to avoid a threat, attempting to avoid some kind of circumstance. The most creative surgeon is the surgeon con-confronted with something they haven't seen before. And then in that instance of surgery, they devise a new suture technique. They devise a new way to approach a failed heart. A radiologist who's looking at some kind of imagery of cancer -- you know, they're not a robot. If

we just wanted to judge cancer with robots, we could do that, and we will. But at the top of the robots, the artificial intelligence systems that will be studying the images for cancer, will be an intuitively driven, hypothesis-oriented, calculating risk-taker called a human that a computer can never be. So now imagine the radiologist of the future backed up by twenty-five supercomputers, artificial intelligence systems, who now is able to then, then look at a scan of a person's kidney and tell you instantly, not only *if* they have cancer, *where* they have cancer, where it's moved, what kind of cancer it is, where it's going, and what it's likely to do. That is creativity, and all of that occurs within an instant.

Then that creativity becomes, becomes cumulative. The creative expression of one person then becomes the baseline condition for another person. The function of learning… to learn that, I can learn that it's possible to think of…I'll give you an example. So, last week, I was in Switzerland. For some reason I had access to this Star Trek show on Netflix, that I don't have access to here, called *Star Trek: Discovery*. *Star Trek: Discovery* is the latest version, 2018 version, of a whole new way of thinking about *Star Trek*. So they had this theory that they're projecting, which turns out to be scientifically possible, which is that there are a fungi in the galaxy that are connected into a massive life form. So what's the largest life form on earth?

Pardhe: The great whale?

Crow: No!

Jordan [*videographer*]: Fungi.

Crow: Fungi! Probably after that are aspen trees. There are fungi that go for thousands of square miles, possibly cover the entire planet. So the hypothesis in this science fiction idea, created by a science fiction writer, manifested in a film, a movie, a multi-part miniseries called *Star Trek:*

Discovery, was that, "Well, why don't we assume that there are fungi now in an ecosystem not limited only to the earth?" So you probably operate under the simplistic model that the earth is a closed ecosystem. The probability that the earth is a closed ecosystem is zero. And so we don't know much about it yet. So now I can imagine that [*he snaps*] like that. The writer of that story can then take that fungi thing and now can say, "Now imagine that this fungi exists across the galaxy. And perhaps it's a mechanism for faster than speed of light transport."

VandenEinde: That's a true example of creativity.

Crow: Yes. Now is faster than speed of light transport possible? The answer is yes, so you need to track these kinds of things. Physicists in Italy have been able to move light particles faster than the speed of light on an experimental basis. How is that possible?

Dzenga: That's creative?

Crow: No, that's possible because they are not limited even by Einstein's theories. So what is a theory? A theory is nothing but the latest explanation for how something works. It is the latest, yet again incomplete, explanation of how the world works. You know how long it takes Einstein to come up with a theory of relativity according to his own biography?

Emma: A second?

Crow: An hour. And so again, this whole notion… people get all distorted they think that work is a function of time.

Dzenga: Oh, yeah. It amazes me because you do so many things, and this University is big and you are invested and involved in all aspects of it.

Crow: Yes.

Dzenga: And, you know, I'm like "Where do you find time?" Because Barrett in itself is varied, it's myriad, it has so many things.

Crow: Yes

Dzenga: And I was just wondering.

Crow: Well, so the other thing is that you don't have to know everything. It's impossible, so don't even try. You can't control everything, so don't try. What you have to do … the smart person decides what they can control, what they can influence, and when they can affect the outcome of. So! great interview. Thank you. Nice to see you.

VandenEinde: Yes, of course!

Pardhe: Thank you for your participation! If you have any more thoughts or if you'd like to share any more information later on, please contact Vice Dean Nicola Foote, and if you have any questions about this interview or the 30th Anniversary Oral History Project, you can contact the Vice Dean. It was a pleasure meeting you!