

Interviewee: Gregory Clark [G]
Interviewer: Amy Charron [A]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

A: So I'm going to begin this by introducing myself. I am Amy Charron from the University of Texas. And if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself?

G: I'm Gregory Clark from Brigham Young University. I'm, right now, president of RSA.

A: Very cool. Alright, well I'm just gonna ask you some questions about your experience with RSA. This being the 50th anniversary, we kind of want to try and catalog some of those experiences that you guys have had. So let's start out with: When did you first join RSA?

G: I don't remember exactly. I completed my PhD in 1985, and within a couple of years of that, I joined. I remember when I joined they were still doing the conference where they had been doing it every year: in a motel in Arlington, Texas, I heard. I didn't ever make it. I almost made it. I had to call at the last minute and cancel because of—I don't remember why. Some sort of a problem. And then soon after that, the conference started moving around. But for the organization's first few years—I don't know how many, somebody else will—the conference was based out of UT-Arlington and was held there. So I remember participating in the conferences through the 90s. I'm trying to place things. I remember by 1996, there was a call for a new editor of *RSQ*, and I thought about that, but by that time I was actually a full professor. That was ten years after I started in a tenure-track job, but I decided not to apply. Two years later, I found myself on the board—in '98, I believe. For reasons that I also don't remember, my board assignment was two years instead of four. Sometimes over the years, our leaders—including me—have gotten confused and not held elections when they should be held, and so I was plugged in on a truncated term in order to fill one of those gaps. And then in 2000, I applied to be the editor of *RSQ*. And so, after two years on the board, I became the editor. That was a four-year term. After three years in, I was getting ready to move out, and Mike Leff—this was at our Las Vegas conference¹—took me to lunch and pitched that I should do a second term. He must have been head of the publications committee, I don't know. He talked me into it. It was hard to say no to Mike Leff, so I actually did two terms. I did that from 2000 to 2008. Then as I was finishing that, Jack Selzer, who was president, in Chicago invited me out to a friendly lunch—that's what I thought it was—and pitched becoming the executive director. I am capable of saying no to Jack, but I didn't, and so I became executive director for four years, and that was 2008 to 2012. At that point I was done. I had about six months before I got a call from David Zarefsky, who was head of the nominating committee, saying that the nominating committee had selected me to be the president-elect, and I tried to say no. I held him off for a couple of weeks, but my wife actually thought it was a good idea. She's usually

¹ The RSA conference was held in Las Vegas in 2002.

smarter than I am, so I said yes. And so—that was in 2013—I officially became president-elect in 2014, working toward the 2016 conference in Atlanta, which I built. And then my term as president began in July 2016, and it ends in a few weeks. So that's kind of my history in terms of offices held. And through that time, I've gone to conferences and institutes.

[05:10]

A: Very cool.

G: But I was present at the creation of the institute. I've been present through the growth spurt. When I started, RSA was about 300 people.

A: Wow.

G: And now my conference in Atlanta was close to 1,600. It's hard to say what our membership numbers are because our membership numbers fluctuate. People join for the conference and then let it lapse. I can't even say what a stable average membership is. It actually seems to fluctuate as much as from 1,500 to 900 from year to year. We're hoping—we've done some things to try to stabilize that.

A: Alright, well that's really interesting. I really enjoyed hearing about your history. But just to ask a follow-up about that, you described this long tenure with the organization. And so can you take us through the place that RSA was? Like, RSA itself. You've said a little bit about it and some of the people that you worked with, but just kind of like what the goals of RSA [were] and how those have changed, like up to and through this conference? The visions and maybe just how the organization itself has gone through some transformation during your time?

G: RSA, when I first encountered it, was a conference and a journal, and the aspirations of the organization as I understood them were to perpetuate the conference and the journal. As I understood it, the oral history I got from people, was that RSA came into being when people interested in rhetoric who were in English discovered kindred spirits who were interested in rhetoric who were in what was then "speech" or "speech communication"—now comm—and realized that both groups felt like they were marginal in their fields as defined by English studies and comm studies, and had more in common with each other than they had with many people in their departments. And so where those two circles meet, RSA was created to provide the collegiality and the dialogue that rhetoricians were hungry for. People in rhetoric were usually at that time pretty isolated in their own departments. When I went into my department—my job that I still am in—they had just hired another person trained in rhetoric six months before me, and I was the second one. Otherwise it was a literature department—and that's an English department. That was everybody's predicament. I remember when I was offered the job I have, I called Wayne Booth, who had become a friend at RSA events. We had a lot in common. We both have the same roots, and we're both from Utah and had become friends. I said I was afraid about being isolated, and he said, "Oh, you're always

isolated. In every department, a rhetorician's going to be isolated. Your network's going to be outside the department, not inside it." So that's kind of what RSA was, and what it operated as. It was small enough that it operated as a kind of a club in a way. People just working laterally with each other, not very hierarchically, to take care of the journal and take care of the conference. I remember the executive director at that time was my friend and dissertation advisor Michael Halloran, and he carried around a checkbook in his back pocket and that was the RSA financials. So it was pretty simple and pretty informal, and all we wanted to do was perpetuate the journal and perpetuate the conference. Then around the early 2000s, it began to grow. I don't know exactly why. Some of it had to do with [the fact that] we got ambitious, and we started to do things that would deliberately make the organization grow without thinking through where that might take us. We recognized that we were not going to become NCA,² we were not going to become 4Cs³, which are large corporations really. But we wanted to be able to do more things to perpetuate the study of rhetoric. So it was in those years that, under the leadership of people like Jack Selzer and David Zarefsky and Jerry Hauser, we invented the institute, and we joined the American Council of Learned Societies, which put us in a position where we were now working with other organizations, large and small, of scholars. And we incorporated, we got 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, which gave us some advantages, and we started to grow. Our conferences successively got larger and larger, which meant we had to create an infrastructure that would support them. And now we're at the point where people sometimes complain that we're institutionalizing. And we *are* institutionalizing; we have to in order to handle the complexity of what we do. We went from—I don't know what the old budget was—but we'd spend several thousand dollars a year to I think the budget for the Atlanta conference alone was over 200,000. I don't have the figures in my head, but we're responsible for the movement of a large amount of money. We have a lot of initiatives going on. We have a lot of federal rules and state rules—we're incorporated in Illinois—that we have to pay attention to, a lot of liabilities. So it's not the innocent group anymore. I kind of find myself thinking about it as if we're a garage band of neighbors that's become a record company.
[laughs]

[12:24]

A: That makes a lot of sense.

G: That's kind of how it works.

A: Yeah. That totally makes a lot of sense. To kind of add on to that question—or it could go in a different direction, either way, I'll leave it up to you—can you tell me a story about a prominent memory or a good memory or a bad memory? Some prominent memory that you have related to RSA, and whether that means in terms of, like, it just was funny or it just was really weird and something crazy happened, or it was just important in your scholarship or your development as a scholar?

² National Communication Association.

³ Conference on College Composition and Communication.

G: The memories that are most prominent are more personal. They're about personal relationships. As you know, as a graduate student you read people's work, and there are some people whose work you identify with and becomes quite influential, and they gain in your imagination a kind of star power. I had several of those people as influences who I didn't really know, but I held them in a reasonably realistic sort of awe. In RSA, they each became my friends, and they did that by reaching out. I talked about Mike Leff pulling me aside and taking me to lunch and talking me into doing another round as editor. The reason I couldn't say no to him was because I admired him so much.

A: [chuckles]

G: I admired his work. Just that he would notice and have confidence in me meant that I couldn't say no. Same thing with David Zarefsky. Same thing with Wayne Booth. I remember people who became friends—Pat Bizzell. I had always admired her work, and we became friends.

[child talking outside of the room]

[14:32]

A: You can keep going. I'm just going to shut the door.

[sound of door closing]

G: So what RSA provided me were personal relationships with senior people who were influential in the field, which bolstered my confidence professionally as well as gave me good people to be friends with. And I think other people will say that's what they've experienced, and that's why the last few years, at every conference, which has gotten bigger and bigger, people are saying, "It's too big. RSA has gotten too big," because that intimacy is lost, they think. And so what we've tried to do in the leadership is perpetuate that intimacy by talking a lot about how, sure, our first and foremost goal is to perpetuate and strengthen the study of rhetoric as a field of study and an intellectual discipline that may not be in most campuses designated by a department—so it's an interdiscipline. But the thing that we are most emotionally attached to is the idea of mentoring. So there's a lot going on in our discussions and a lot going on in our programming about mentoring and getting senior people together with graduate students. We pay a lot of attention to graduate students. The last I looked, I think graduate students are about 35%, maybe 40%, of our members. It's always been that way. And so if graduate students take the opportunity, they can connect with whomever they want to connect with who's here. People who are big shots are—I don't know of any exceptions—always gracious and open. Then we also structure opportunities for those people to connect with graduate students. So for me, that's been the most memorable, and that's affected me the most.

A: Yeah. I find that to be true of my experience, just for what it's worth. Definitely.

G: And the other organizations are so big that that's a little harder to do. You know, when you're a graduate student, you learn pretty quickly that, to a certain extent, your career depends on how well you can network with established people.

A: For sure. Definitely. So I've been doing a little bit of thinking more along this history that you've given. I want to take a little time to maybe project into the future. What do you think—or how do you think, rather, RSA might change in the years to come? And not just in an ideal sense, but what do you *expect* as a forecast? And then maybe as a follow-up question, we'll go into what do you *want* to happen for the organization.

[17:37]

G: Well, the thing that has preoccupied us as leaders—for a decade and a half, at least—is growth, and the question has been how do we keep up with it. How do we keep it from getting out of control? We're always playing catch-up with the growth. That seemed to go on and on and on. We were willing to grow because we'd say, "Well, we need to stop growing," and then somebody else would say, "Okay, who are we going to reject from the conference? Are we going to make the conference more exclusive?" There are aspirational problems with that. We want to be inclusive. I'm going to talk about that in my talk tomorrow,⁴ but there are also practical problems. One thing people don't understand about the business aspect of the society is that we hold the conferences in hotels, and hotels are expensive. You have to fill a certain number of sleeping rooms and buy a certain amount of food and beverage in order to get the use of the meeting rooms, which means that you've got to have a conference that's big enough to cover the expenses that you're incurring, and so to a degree, if you start capping things then you might have to change the venues. The problem is you have to book conference space out five years, six years. It's really complicated to impose caps, but it seems to be levelling out. I'm seeing signs that the growth period may be stabilizing. It's premature to say it *is* happening, but that's—I'm seeing indications I haven't seen before that we may be stabilizing at about this size. That would be good because then we could stabilize our infrastructure instead of playing catch-up. So I'm kind of hoping that our numbers will stabilize, and then we can strengthen and reinforce the infrastructure that supports what we do. What we do is—our top priority is—to perpetuate and strengthen the study of rhetoric across disciplines, and sometimes we're so busy just trying to keep up with the organizational details that we neglect that or let it run on its own momentum. The other thing I'm seeing changing is that the organization, in the first few years of my involvement, was predominantly male, almost exclusively white. And everybody was politically progressive and liberal, so there was no resistance to diversity. It's just that there wasn't—it wasn't happening, and it wasn't happening for much larger reasons than anything that we controlled. But over the years I've been in the organization, international members have started coming, people of color have started coming. As with the rest of the larger culture, LGBTQ people have become more visible than they had been in the past. I don't think there are more LGBTQ people, but

⁴ I.e., Clark's address at the President's Panel and Awards Ceremony, session R01 in the program from the 2018 RSA conference.

they are now accepted openly. And we have disabled people who are voicing a need for accessibility. So I think that RSA is becoming much more eclectic in the identities that it encompasses. If you look at the new slate of board members, we have the most eclectic identity set of people on the board coming in that RSA has ever seen in terms of race, in terms of ideology, in terms of age, in terms of gender, and all sorts of things. So that is changing the identity—collective identity of RSA in ways that I'm delighted with. It should've changed earlier, but RSA demographically is a reflection of the larger academic culture, which demographically has been white, male. Early in the 2000s, we got a lot more women coming in, a lot more women in leadership. We made a concerted effort as leaders to bring women into leadership and bring people of color into leadership. People of color—there weren't a lot of people to choose from. Now there are. So culturally, RSA is becoming very different in those ways. What that means for the discipline is that those people bring their experience and they bring their concerns and if you look at a conference program now—this year's conference program compared with a conference program 10, 15 years ago—there's much more on “adjective rhetorics” using adjectives we wouldn't have thought of 15 years ago, which means that the field as we are defining it in our own discussion is expanding. There's more going on that we are calling rhetoric than there used to be. Which I'm a fan of. I'm a fan of big rhetoric because I think that if people in a community or a culture understand that so much of what they encounter is rhetorical, there's so much influence going at them, whether inadvertently or whether somebody is intending it, that people really need to be able to identify motives and consequences and make choices about how they're going to be influenced. That's my interest in studying rhetoric, basically. Practical rhetorical criticism is a way of life, and we're becoming better situated to do that. So that's where I see RSA going, and I think it's where it should go.

[25:21]

A: That's great. So one maybe last question, if you could—and I'm going off book for this one. What maybe advice or nugget of wisdom might you offer to someone who is new to the field or for whom this is their first or second conference? What's your—looking back on this history, this very awesome history that you shared with us, you know, what would you take from that to offer the next people coming up?

G: The first thing is that I would advise everyone coming up to pay very careful attention to work-life balance. There will always be people who appear to be succeeding professionally who do it at the expense of other people in their lives or don't have other people in their lives because they are focused on that. And so be prepared to make what appear to be professional sacrifices in order to have a life. Because you get to my stage—I can look at the shelf where I have my publications. I look at it and I think, you know, “When I was 35 I would have been amazed and delighted to see that.” I look at it now and think, “Okay, I've got a few more years and I need to make my life worthwhile.” I've got children and grandchildren now. I've got a life. And there are periods when I neglected that. This profession we're in encourages that. Sometimes it feels like it requires that. Certainly you look around, and you see others—your peers—and you feel like you're falling behind because they are workaholics. And it's just not worth it. You

might produce a lot of stuff, you might become—my kids used to say, “Are you famous?” And I’d say, “Yeah, within about 300 people.”

A: [laughs]

G: That’s what fame is in the academy. It’s not that important, ultimately. What’s important is you get tenure. What’s important is you teach well. What’s important is you publish things you care about, and of course that’s about getting tenure too, but you don’t do it just to get tenure. What’s important is you enjoy your work, but it’s a job. It’s just a job. It’s not—you know, we’re not monks. We don’t have God’s calling. So that’s one thing. Regarding professional affiliations, we talk a lot in our board meetings about people—about half of our membership right now considers RSA their primary organization, and that’s a good thing. The problem is there are a couple of things that we don’t do and shouldn’t do and never will do that other organizations do, and one is we don’t host a job market. I don’t know if others in the leadership would agree with me, but there’s a sense in which I think RSA shouldn’t be anybody’s primary organization in relation to their affiliation with the center of gravity in their discipline as defined by departments and curricula that do hiring, tenuring. So people need to become visible and active in NCA or Cs or MLA⁵ where the job market—well, in English, Cs doesn’t have much. Are you in English?

A: Technically. I’m in a rhetoric department at UT, but—

[29:26]

G: Cs doesn’t have much of a job market. MLA is still the English job market. NCA is the comm job market, and you need to go to those conferences early on, and maybe you’ll find yourself getting involved there. Then for real intellectual feeding and real collegiality that you’ll miss in those organizations, you use RSA. That’s why RSA was conceived as every two years for a conference rather than every year. But if people would opt in to only RSA, they would certainly be at the center of rhetorical studies, but they would not be at the center of English studies or comm studies. And even in a rhetoric department, most of the rhetoric departments I know end up having dual appointments. I don’t know if they do that at UT.

A: Sometimes. There’s at least, yeah, something.

G: So I think there are two kinds of scholarly organizations. One is the instrumental kind that puts you into the machine where you need to be in terms of managing and perpetuating your career. The other one—and there’s good intellectual stuff going on there [i.e., instrumental organizations]—but more intense and intimate intellectual stuff goes on here. I’d suggest that people think about that, and think pretty practically about that. They might find this conference—most people say they do—more satisfying. But those conferences are both frustrating and important.

⁵ Modern Language Association.

A: Sure. To kind of touch back on that archive project you were talking about, it's both at once. Kind of this historical storytelling, this neat place to have a good story but then there is also this practical part that you need to get to, and that's what I hear you saying about going to MLA and going to these other conferences.

G: You need to manage your career. You need to be businesslike about it.

A: Yeah.

G: And then there's also the rich, intellectual professional life too.

A: Sure. Well, is there anything else that you want to add that you didn't get a chance to talk about?

G: No. I don't think so.

A: Alright, well it's been a pleasure. This was a lot of fun.