

Interviewee: Rick Wysocki [W]
Interviewer: David Zarefsky [Z]
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Date: 31 May 2018

Transcript

W: When did you first join RSA?

Z: I came kind of late to the party. It was sometime in the late 90s, and I had already been fairly active in rhetoric but had just never gotten around to paying much attention to RSA. And then I think what got me in was someone invited me to be on a panel at one of the conferences. Either that or I found a citation to something in the journal.¹ Those two things happened at about the same time, and I suddenly took much more notice of the organization, and then it was a very quick process to get in and get involved.

W: Can I ask, in what ways—you said you were involved with rhetoric outside of RSA. So what did that mean?

Z: Well, I was very active in NCA² in the communication discipline. I had taught courses in rhetoric at Northwestern, at that point twenty-five years, and was fairly familiar with a lot of journals in the field but had really not discovered RSA until then.

W: That's awesome. Do you remember—I'm immediately going off questions, so I apologize, but I'm curious—do you remember what that panel was about that you were invited to join?

Z: The panel was about the metaphor of corporatization of the university. And I think I was selected because I was, at that time, a dean. So I was kind of representing the evil administration. And it was the conference in Washington, I believe, in 2000. And as a result of being there, I went and saw several other panels and immediately noticed the interdisciplinarity of the organization and the excitement of a lot of the scholarship that was being presented. And so I was easily hooked.

W: Yeah. You said you were seen as the evil administration. Did you feel that people felt that way about you?

Z: No, no, no. I'm kidding.

W: Oh, okay. [laughs] I was just curious.

Z: I was actually treated very well all the time I was in administration.

¹ I.e., *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

² National Communication Association.

W: That's great. That's super great, obviously. How would you describe the organization at that time when you joined it? What was the vibe you got from RSA?

Z: You know, in some ways, it's hard to remember because my sense of the organization then is influenced by my sense of what it's become since. I guess the terms I would use would be "exciting," "interdisciplinary." Very small and informal compared to what it's become. But a place where people could easily find their way and make their way around. It was even then a place where graduate students, junior scholars, senior scholars would interact on very comfortable terms. Those are some of the things I immediately noticed about it.

W: How do you—you mentioned at the beginning of that answer that you were inflected by what it's become versus what it was then. Would you be comfortable walking through what you see to be the differences?

Z: Yeah, I'd be comfortable.

W: Okay! [laughs]

Z: As I recall, when I first became involved the organization had somewhere between three and four hundred members.

W: Oh, wow.

Z: So it's approximately quadrupled. Now, all sorts of things happened as a consequence of that. The conference had maybe 150, 200 people. There was a small number of concurrent sessions. The scheduling of the conference as a whole was more leisurely: started later in the morning, ended earlier, fewer conflicts at any given time, a lot of interaction that went on outside the sessions. And many of those things have changed just as a consequence of the size, but the spirit that animated all that, I think, is very much still there.

W: That's good to hear. [laughs] 'Cause I feel that way about it too. Very exciting and maybe a bit more conflicts, like you said, but still very collegial, I guess. Do you remember who some of the key people—"key" is maybe too value-laden—but some people that you remember fondly meeting during your early years as part of RSA?

Z: I met a number of the people in English whose names I had known but who I hadn't known really at all.

W: Mmhmm.

Z: Because prior to that, I had come at rhetoric entirely from a communication perspective.

[04:57]

W: Do you see—it seems like you're not pointing to that as being a conflict, but kind of a generative intersection?

Z: Yes.

W: Do you remember any examples of where you might have seen that generative intersection kind of in practice at RSA?

Z: Well, I remember specifically one panel. I can't remember when it was. It was a double-session panel that was put together on the topic of argumentation, which I am quite interested in. And the thesis of the whole program was that this is a particular example of a topic that crosscuts disciplinary lines, that both English and communication are very interested in, but they come at in slightly different ways, that they would identify different examples of key terms or key concepts, but that they're really going after the same kind of reality. And, I mean, that just really struck me.

W: Yeah. That's really interesting. So I guess speaking more organizationally, what did you see during the years that you joined? Or maybe in general, the early time of you in the organization, what was RSA doing? What were the sort of goals of the organization or its values or question mark—

Z: Well, I think at the time I came in, RSA was understood as one of a whole batch of organizations concerned with rhetoric, each of which was relatively small and that were perceived as being in some kind of conflict, although it was never clear exactly how, except perhaps a conflict for competition for members. But at the same time, that's when really RSA began to verbalize as a mission being or becoming the umbrella organization for rhetorical studies, and doing so in a way that didn't threaten any other organization. And if you think about it, that's a delicate balance to pull off. I think over the years, with a great degree of success, that's what happened. So that, for example, instead of RSA and ISHR³ being seen as competitors, there are a number of ways in which the organizations have helped and benefitted each other, including the presence of an ISHR-related seminar at all of the RSA conferences, some common administrative structures and arrangements, and so on. And the same thing has gone on with RSA's relationships with just about every other one of the rhetoric organizations that are all now much smaller. And I think people have discovered that people join RSA without giving up whatever other affiliations they have because it's understood as providing a value added from its umbrella character. That's probably the biggest single change that's taken place, apart from the obvious just numerics of it.

W: That's fascinating. I guess because I didn't come from—I came to rhetoric much later, obviously. RSA was already that, so it's interesting to hear how it's becoming that. It's really interesting.

³ International Society for the History of Rhetoric.

Z: Yeah, it self-consciously made itself into that.

W: Yeah? And you said “self-consciously.” That was kind of a verbalized “this is what we are trying to do” type of thing?

Z: Yes.

W: That’s fascinating.

Z: That was the commitment of the then-RSA leadership that’s just been carried on by successors.

W: Do you remember some of the people who that leadership was comprised by at the time?

Z: The president at the time was Fred Antczak who organized the small committee—I forget the exact title of it—but what it was to visualize the future for RSA.⁴ So Fred was the president, Jerry Hauser was the president-elect. So I’m talking about the period really 2000, 2001, 2002, which I think was really the seminal time for this change taking place.

W: Absolutely. Can you talk me through—I’m sorry I’m jumping around. I’m just going through this list of questions. I want to make sure I hit all the things that I’m supposed to. Are there any particular and specific kind of memories you have of being a part of RSA that are particularly important to you or exceptionally memorable?

[10:00]

Z: Hmm. I have a lot of good memories. I don’t know if I’ve got something that just really stands out.

W: Good ones are good.

Z: I got into the leadership at a fairly early time after I joined because I was at a fairly senior point in my career. So I was put onto the board in 2002 and then became president-elect in 2004 and was president in 2006 and -7. And then, unfortunately, I got another round as president when Mike Leff died. I was then—I was not the immediate past president, but the one right after that when he died. And the constitution has no specific provisions in it for succession, so the board of the organization asked me would be willing to come back and fill out the rest of his term, which I said I would of course do. But I couldn’t direct a second conference because at the time I was on leave and teaching somewhere else and had no infrastructure. And Jack Selzer, who walked by us

⁴ For more on this committee, see p. 115 in Joshua Gunn and Diane Davis’s *Fifty Years of Rhetoric Society Quarterly: Selected Readings, 1968 – 2018*.

a few minutes ago, agreed he would direct the conference a second time if I would do the rest of it a second time. And so I guess if you want to ask about specific memories, this says as much about Mike Leff as about the organization, but it says something about each: that when he became so ill and died so suddenly, everyone just stepped up to do whatever he or she could. I asked a lot of people to pitch in on different things, and no one said no.

W: Yeah, that's really powerful. That speaks so well to the organization, and the commitment to the organization. And you think that that's indicative of Mike Leff's influence on RSA membership?

Z: Yes, yes.

W: That is a very powerful memory. I'm struck by, or interested in something you said that I hadn't thought about: the labor involved in the running of the organization versus the conference. Did you find that running the conference was far and away the bulk of a president's labor?

Z: Yes.

W: And that's why you couldn't do it at the time?

Z: Well, I couldn't do it at the time because I had, as I said, no infrastructure at all. I had the use of an office and a telephone. I had no knowledge of student help that I could draw upon, no staff that I could draw upon. And I knew I needed those because I had done the conference once before. And remember, this was a conference that was about a third the size that it is now.

W: Yeah. That sounds extremely intensive, and of course impossible without the infrastructure as well. [chuckles] That's really interesting.

Z: We have steadily added infrastructure to the conference.

W: What types of infrastructure? Or can you talk us through what you mean by that?

Z: Well, for instance, I directed the conference the year it was in Memphis.⁵ The board selected Memphis as the site with virtually no prior research, analysis, deliberation. I was fortunate that Leff was there. He was the local host. He and I went and negotiated a contract with the hotel there. We now have a professional firm that investigates hotels and negotiates contracts for us and knows what they're doing, where it had been a situation where every conference was reinventing the wheel. I put the program together pretty much by hand. There was no online submission system. People sent in hard-copy stuff, usually the day before the deadline, and I sorted things out and created panels and so on. And we've now bought a whole software system so that those submissions

⁵ The RSA conference was held in Memphis in 2006.

are all done online, the paneling is now at least in part done online. So that's all new. We now have, although it's largely volunteers, we have some people that are dedicated to the task of lining up exhibitors, soliciting ads for the convention program, marketing the conference. All of those things came to the person who was the main conference planner. Now, understood the conference was considerably smaller, and it was an easier process to manage all that than it has become, but there was no infrastructure to do it with.

[15:11]

W: Yeah, and so all of that you would have had to do with your single desk and your—
[laughs]

Z: Right.

W: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. One of the things I look at, and I know you do too in your works, social movement-type rhetorics, and one of the things that I find repeatedly is as organizations grow, occasionally that comes with some growing pains.

Z: Yes.

W: And without—obviously RSA is incredible and so wonderful—but I wonder, without dissing on RSA or anything, was there a felt sense of any of those sorts of growing pains?

Z: There was a felt sense of nostalgia: that we've somehow lost something by losing this small, informal conference. Now, whenever I heard that, I didn't give that much credence because RSA is still so much smaller than MLA⁶ or NCA or the main disciplinary organizations. But there was a sense of nostalgia. There wasn't so much a sense of tangible loss as a danger, of tangible loss if we weren't careful about what we were doing. So for instance, one of the things that has come up on a few occasions as we've grown is, should we create formal divisions? Should we have a history of rhetoric division, a rhetoric of science division, and so on. And we've invariably turned that down, and I hope we continue to turn it down because that's a source of division and tension in the allocation of resources. And instead we've had just a continuation of the goodwill that characterized us when we were much smaller. We've continued the accessibility of the leadership of the organization. It's easy to get to the board, it's easy to get picked for the board if you want to, it's easy to get response out of the leaders of the organization. We've kept up the openness to young and old scholars alike. Now all of these are deliberate things that we've said, "You know, if we're not careful, this could happen or that could happen." But I think by and large, RSA has really been able to evolve into the organization that it is now without significant loss of what it once had.

⁶ Modern Language Association.

W: Mmhhh. Yeah, it really seems that way to me as well. And I wonder, projecting toward the future—with your much lengthier than mine, at least, experience with RSA—do you see RSA continuing to grow in that direction? Or what types of futures do you see for the organization?

Z: I see a very good future for the organization assuming it makes some key decisions in the right way. For instance, one of the best things we did was hiring Kathie Cesa, who ostensibly maintains our membership records, but in fact she does a lot more than that. She's going to retire before too many more years, so there's a key decision to be made about planning that succession. And if we do that right, I think things will go on fairly well, but there's the opportunity to make a mistake. We're moving in the direction of professionalizing the executive director role, which for a long period of time was entirely a volunteer role that somebody would do out of their back pocket. And we're gradually getting beyond that. Jerry Hauser has just been a tremendous executive director. He's going to step out of that role within the next few years. Will we continue to make smart decisions about that succession? I mean, it's those kinds of things that I think will determine the course of the organization. I think we've made great success in broadening the disciplinary base of the organization, but we've really just tapped the surface of what our potential membership could be. And when you think about all the people that are in rhetoric and composition and all the people that are in public speaking and persuasion and so on, we probably would represent one of the largest disciplinary or interdisciplinary constituencies of any field. And as I say, we've kind of barely tapped that for our membership.

W: Yeah.

Z: Now I don't think the trajectory of growth is going to really accelerate. I think if anything it will slow down a little, which is probably good to enable us to absorb growth better. But I foresee that the organization will continue to grow.

[20:07]

W: Mmhhh. Have you noticed—it seems like in what you've said so far, you think that the key attention to persuasion and argument has remained at the heart of RSA and rhetorical inquiry.

Z: I don't know that I'd single those out. I mean, those are the things that I'm particularly interested in. But by the same token, we've had a strong presence all along in rhetoric of religion, rhetoric of science, comparative national studies of rhetoric, rhetoric of health and medicine, rhetoric and gender. You know, just about any kind of subfield that you could think of in rhetorical studies is represented in RSA. And I don't know that I'd say that some are more at the heart than others.

W: I see. And that speaks to—

Z: Except in the sense of my own personal priorities.

W: Yeah, yeah. And I think you might say—correct me if I'm wrong—that speaks to the umbrella nature of the organization?

Z: Yes. Yeah.

W: Yeah?

Z: Yeah. I think it's a sign that we have really largely achieved that.

W: Yeah, that's really interesting. I guess because, like I said earlier, I came along later into RSA's development, I had never really thought of it as an umbrella organization as such. But now that—

Z: Do you think it's a mistake to characterize it that way?

W: No, not at all. I'm learning the history of it, which I think is fascinating. Because personally I haven't yet been to some of the other rhetoric conferences. I'm in English—rhetoric and composition field—so I guess my conferences thus far have been RSA because I lean a little toward RSA and Cs⁷ as well.

Z: Now one of the things that I haven't mentioned along the lines that you were just talking about—one of the things that people from English and composition have really represented strongly in RSA is a pedagogical commitment. There are some organizations where there's a tension or conflict between pedagogy and research or pedagogy and theory, and that's not been the case in RSA. And I think it's because of the presence of so many people that have come out of the composition field. The thing that the communication field has pretty clearly brought in is a concern for civic discourse and the quality of public rhetoric. Those two things have just fit together so well because public rhetoric has obvious pedagogical implications if you think that part what we're doing is in the business of training citizens. And pedagogy is not an end in itself, it's an end for some purpose. And so I think that's been a very nice linkage.

W: Yeah, I totally agree. It's really interesting to hear you articulate it that way. Do you see other differences in the ways that RSA has been able to capture this great swath of rhetorical inquiry in ways that other conferences that we don't have to name so as not to talk poorly on them—but what's unique about RSA besides the ability to capture these different disciplines?

Z: Well, this is probably related, but I think RSA has developed the ability to be both broad and deep. So for instance, I go to a couple of conferences that are specific to argumentation. Well, by their nature, they cover a much narrower scope than RSA would, but I would not say that RSA covers argumentation shallowly or simplistically. Now granted, it doesn't have as large a percentage of its program devoted to it. But I

⁷ Conference on College Composition and Communication.

think it's equally in depth and substantive. I could make that same kind of comment about a number of other subfields so that it's not just that umbrella that goes like this, it's an umbrella that goes like this. [indicating height and width with hands]

W: Yeah, that's really interesting. I like the metaphor of the flat umbrella versus the curved umbrella. [laughs] I guess the gestural metaphor.

Z: Yeah, I shouldn't have done that with the—

W: To be honest, I said that sneakily to get it in there. [laughs] Another thing, I was curious—so this is my second RSA; I went to the previous one in Atlanta. That was the previous—yeah, the previous one.

Z: Yeah, Atlanta.

[25:04]

W: If you were talking—well, you are talking to me—but people like me, you know, scholars new, I'm in my PhD program now, new to the organization, kind of in their formative moments of RSA, what types of things do you think they should know about the history of the organization? Or what types of knowledge would be useful?

Z: I can think of two things in particular. One is you're welcome. I mean, the organization is literally open to you. RSA is very interested, and has been all along, in the cultivation and development of new scholars. And the conference for a long time has had things in it that are evidence of that kind of determination, like the research network where students will bring papers in progress and get them workshopped and reviewed by people other than their own graduate mentors in a fairly risk-free environment. We have had some special programs on professional development topics like "how to turn your dissertation into a book," "how to get into the job market," and so forth. There is a graduate student caucus, which, like most of what we do, is pretty informal, but is an opportunity for graduate students in the organization to come together at the conference and share experiences. And then the second thing I would emphasize, although not just for the reason that you asked me to, is the creation of the institute, which I think is a unique RSA product that just meets an incredible need. And it has an interesting and a little bit twisted kind of story to it. We were trying in the early 2000s to become admitted to the American Council of Learned Societies, which we succeeded in doing. But the requirements for that at the time included an annual meeting. Now frankly, I think we probably could've convinced them that the annual meeting of the board was enough, but we didn't want to take any chances. So we had long discussions about, "Should we turn the conference into an annual conference?" And we said "no." We said, "The world does not need another annual rhetoric conference. You know, there's this and there's this and there's this and there's this." And that was part of not wanting to compete with all these other organizations. So they said, "If we don't do that, is there something else we can do to fill in the years when we don't have the conference and satisfy this ACLS requirement of an annual meeting?"

And there was a committee charged to investigate this that I was one of the members of, but the leadership of was Glen McClish, who was then in San Diego in English. And this committee came back to the board with the recommendation that we create the institute. They said, "This seems to be a void. Nobody has anything like it." We originally imagined it as being intended almost entirely for graduate students or very beginning professors and would include these two components.⁸ And the original idea for the seminar was that it would be fairly basic instruction in things that people kind of needed to know but didn't get at their own home institution. Like a lot of places didn't have much in history of rhetoric. So we said, we'll do a week long seminar in history of rhetoric and then match that up with a number of more specific and more timely topics that would be available in a workshop format. And that's really how it started. The first couple of institutes were small. They actually lost us a little money. We didn't start it off with the view to it being a profit-making organization. The first couple of institutes were cross-subsidized with revenue from the conference. It quickly became a self-sustaining and net revenue-producing thing, but it wasn't right away. So I guess the second thing I would stress is for people just coming into the discipline, especially for graduate students, this is a still unique kind of opportunity that RSA makes available, and the historical aspect of it is just understanding sort of how it grew and developed and what sorts of commitments it reflected.

[30:09]

W: Yeah, yeah. I've heard so many great things about the summer institute—the institute, rather. I'm hoping to apply soon.

Z: Good.

W: Yeah, I've heard such incredible things about it. I'm curious just as sort of a historical point, because I do rhetorical history stuff as well, what benefits did the American Council of—

Z: Learned Societies.

W: Learned Societies. What was the exigence for trying to become a member organization of that?

Z: Well, do you know what it is?

W: I do not. [laughs]

Z: It's an organization of scholarly societies in the humanities and the humanistically oriented social sciences. Now, don't take that too literally. The American Economic Association is a member, the American Political Science Association, et cetera. There are now about 75 member organizations. So the benefits that it produces for us—first

⁸ I.e., seminars and workshops.

off, just to state the obvious, it's better to be in than not because you are identified as one of the major scholarly societies in the humanities. They do sponsor a number of fellowships that our members can compete for as a result of being involved. And they have an association of executive directors. That's probably turned out to be the most valuable thing, is that a lot of the common problems that affect scholarly societies—I mean, everything ranging from how do you get insurance for your convention to what kind of public role do you want to take about the state of the humanities in the country—that's the venue that those things get talked about in.

W: Mmhm. Okay, that makes sense. I was just curious, being a naturally curious person.

Z: You know, in some senses, it's sort of analogous to, "What good does accreditation do you?" Well, you could say in some respects it doesn't do a whole lot of tangible good except for what it symbolizes. And in almost any case that I can think of, you'd rather be accredited than not.

W: Yeah, yeah. It's so interesting to me that the summer institute emerged from that need.

Z: Yeah.

W: It's a fascinating rhetorical situation. [chuckles]

Z: Now, under other circumstances, it might have emerged anyway. Or in a different time or for a different reason, but that's how it came about.

W: Yeah, yeah. Do you have—just to ask this question again but in the context of the summer institute—do you have any particular memories of the summer institute that stand out?

Z: I have been to all of them but one. I missed the one in Madison.⁹ And the character of each of them has been a little bit different, but they've always been quite informal, even compared to the conference. They're very informal. Everybody gets together with everybody else. Nobody stands on ceremony. The attitude is we're all here to learn. Some of them I've been a workshop or seminar participant. Some of them I've been a workshop or seminar leader. Once I was just there as an observer, as one of the officers and board members. There's this great sense of energy that you feel there, and I think almost without exception, people leave from them tired but really charged up.

W: Yeah. I can think of a small-scale version of that leaving conferences. The, "I'm so tired, but all I want to do is go work on my thinking." [laughs] Well I guess I have one last question, which is—and I apologize because I'm making this question up. It's not on the list, but it's just something I'm interested in. And I apologize for the expansiveness of

⁹ The institute was held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2015.

this question. But what types of future—I asked you about the organization, but for rhetorical inquiry, less predictive, but where do you hope rhetorical inquiry will go from here? What are your—if you were to give us an objective or two for the discipline that you see.

Z: That is a big charge.

W: I know. And I apologized in advance. [laughs]

[34:43]

Z: Let me begin by saying anytime I'm asked a question about what direction is the discipline going in, I can never answer the question because it seems to me it's always going in lots of different directions at once. And it sounds incredibly imperialistic to say, "Well, it's going off in this way." That somewhat colors my answer to your question because what I *hope* will happen is that it will develop stronger disciplinary roots but at the same time remain very much an interdisciplinary intellectual activity. So there are not very many places that have rhetoric departments as such. I'd kind of like to see more of them, but I wouldn't like to see a change in the notion that on a given campus, you can have rhetoricians that are in English, and rhetoricians in communication, and rhetoricians in classics, and rhetoricians in philosophy and have them interact. I think the strength of the discipline really depends on our being able to move in both of those directions at once so that rhetoric once again is seen as itself having a firm footing, as it did back when it was one of the seven liberal arts, and rhetoric departments are not seen as being on the margin, or easily expendable, or second rate, or whatever. But at the same time, you can practice rhetoric without a license, as it were; you don't have to be in a self-designated rhetoric department or program in order to be recognized as an outstanding rhetorical scholar. I see the same kind of thing with respect to the depth versus breadth. You know, we're not so large a discipline that we can afford to have one person doing this and one doing that and so on. On the other hand, it's the very breadth of inquiry that I think sustains the discipline and gives it a sense of energy. So I hope we'll pull in both of those directions at the same time.

W: Yeah. That's a wonderful answer to my strangely specific question. I really appreciate you talking with me. Is there anything else that you would want to say about RSA before I turn the recorder off? That's not necessarily mandated; it's an opportunity, I guess. [laughs]

Z: I think we've pretty much covered the ground. I mean, I've very much enjoyed and continue to enjoy my membership in the organization, the roles that I've been able to play in the leadership of it. I'm very satisfied with where it is now and where it seems to be going. And I think it's just a very strong organization.

W: Yeah. It's a wonderful organization for sure. I'm just so happy to be a part of it myself as well. Well, thank you so much.

Z: You are quite welcome.