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Oral History Interview of John Cavanagh (SOH-001)

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Oral History Interview of John Cavanagh (SOH-001)

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Interview Summary

John C. Cavanagh, a professor in Suffolk University's history department, discusses his educational experiences and his teaching career. The interview covers his educational background; his academic interests; his approach to teaching; and his experiences at Suffolk since he began teaching there in 1970. He concludes by discussing his hopes for the future at Suffolk University.

Subject Headings

Cavanagh, John C.

Education, Higher --United States

Suffolk University

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This interview took place on February 27, 2006, in Professor Cavanagh's office at the Suffolk University History Department, One Beacon St., Boston, MA.

Interview Transcript

(Beginning of recording is cut off)

ELIAS TSISMENAKIS: —2006. I'm here with Professor John Cavanagh, conducting an interview. Could you please state your full name?

JOHN CAVANAGH: John Carroll Cavanagh.

TSISMENAKIS: Where were you born?

CAVANAGH: I was born in Orange, New Jersey, in 1933. Lived there about three months, and departed for New Hampshire.

TSISMENAKIS: Where did you grow up?

CAVANAGH: Lots of places. I moved [seven] times by the time I got to high school, just about. After being born in New Jersey, I moved to New Hampshire, and then to New York City, and back to New Hampshire. Then to New York City, and then to Tallahassee, Florida, and then to Englewood, New Jersey, and finally, Northampton, Massachusetts. And I liked that experience. I kept on readjusting and meeting new people. And that was great stuff, I thought.

TSISMENAKIS: So the adjustments were fairly easy to you?

CAVANAGH: Yeah. For me it was. My family was very much in sync with all of this too.

TSISMENAKIS: Could you tell me about your higher education?

CAVANAGH: Yeah. I went to Dartmouth College, got a bachelors, moved on to Columbia University in New York and got a master's. Then down to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and got a PhD.

TSISMENAKIS: How did you adjust to the rigors of academics in these institutions?

CAVANAGH: It was challenging at Columbia. Graduate school is a little different from undergraduate. At Columbia, I had larger classes than I had at Dartmouth, by far. But I had a superb seminar with my major advisor for my master's, Professor David Donald, an expert in Civil War history. And that's where the fun began, because in a group of twelve students, we all got taken over the coals, so to speak, with our seminar papers being analyzed critically by everybody in the seminar, including the professor. It was something I never had experienced before. And I thrived on it after I got over the shock of being told that my very first seminar paper was pretty much trash.

TSISMENAKIS: When did you decide that you were going to be a history professor?

CAVANAGH: I think that might have come in a very important thing I did after one year at Columbia, '55, '56—I then went to a prep school to teach for two years, and back to Columbia and finished up '58, '59—but after that first year at Columbia, I thought I really would like to be one, and so I decided to find Professor Donald, and discovered he was in Vermont, at a place not far from Dartmouth College, where I used to hang out from time to time. It was very close to Hanover.¹ I sought him out in June of that summer of '56 to ask him whether he thought I should go on to a PhD or not, which was my union card for being a professor. We sat out on the lawn near his house, his wife, Aida, came out and served us some cookies and Coke and all that stuff.

¹ Cavanagh is referring to Hanover, New Hampshire, where Dartmouth College is located.

And he finally decided that yes, I would be doctoral material. But he gave me qualifications about the challenge and all that. But that's why I wanted to hear from him especially. He had been my close mentor and critic for the previous academic year. And that gave me the inspiration to leave the prep school world, after I'd experienced it for a couple of years, and finish my master's to go on for a doctorate. And the rest is (inaudible) taught history.

TSISMENAKIS: So Professor Donald was most likely the professor that inspired you the most?

CAVANAGH: Yes, he was, but at Duke, I found another professor that was inspiring like Donald. Theodore Ropp, long dead now, but of course Donald is still living over in Lincoln, Massachusetts (inaudible). Theodore Ropp, Ted Ropp, was a historian of military history. And had a marvelous classroom technique. It wasn't a seminar, but it was a kind of adaptive seminar. We had about maybe sixteen to eighteen people in there. It was called War in the Modern World, his seminar. A large seminar. We sat around the edges of the room, and there was a table in the middle. And Professor Ropp walked around the room, and made us all contribute, thinking out loud for ourselves about what we'd read, and we talked about it.

He made it clear to me for the first time in my life that history really, truly was constantly in flux. It's not static. It varies with whomever is interpreting it. And it's a matter of getting that across to students too, and he was brilliant at doing that. I learned that that was the way I wanted to teach, rather than say, like I did in prep school, from behind a lectern, and kind of lectured the best I could. I was too young for the job at the time and I didn't do very well. But I decided that lectures should be minimized in my career, and the discussions of readings that had different points of view was much more the point. To help students think for themselves.

So we read interpretations of American history, one of my fields, of course. Early American, Revolutionary War. We read various interpretations, whether they be radical,

liberal or conservative. Compared and contrasted them. I didn't try to, in any way, dictate what they should think. Far from it. I said that they were completely free in their exams even, when given a thought question, to at least prove the point they wanted to make with some evidence. They had to really kind of back up their ideas with the facts, so to speak.

And I always stressed that this truth was elusive. The truth is never certain. I resent professors I know who try to dictate, at least in the world of history, and maybe even English interpretation, literature, dictate that particular professor's point of view, as opposed to maybe more than one point of view. Which I think is important.

So Ropp did it so well that he had a bunch of groupies that came back to his seminar every fall. And I simply went through the experience one more time, through several years, one more time, no tuition, just allowed to audit. To see what was going to happen next time. And he was constantly excited by his material. Outrageously confrontational. All the good things that I like to be. And I also realized that, at Suffolk, it works for most of my majors. It doesn't work too well with the weaker students. But I [am] doing it as well as I can, and I think it's exciting. Keeps me loving my teaching career, and I'm still doing it, at age seventy-two!

TSISMENAKIS: Do you have any favorite historians?

CAVANAGH: Yeah. David Donald. Very thought-provoking man. Constantly re-interpreting history. I learned something about that before even getting to Duke. He wrote a landmark work on Lincoln called *Lincoln Reconsidered* published in 1955, a group of essays. He's revised it twice. It's now up in a new edition. And I use it in my Civil War class, which I'm currently teaching. It dispels myths and stereotypes. It's as fresh today as it was fifty years ago. He has added two new essays for the present edition in the last year. But I like being challenged by stuff like that.

And so it's a perfect basis that's in that volume. One of my four or five books in my course. Perfect catalyst for reactions of the things about Lincoln, also. So put together, all

these things give us plenty of food for thought. And the class appreciates, basically, the discussion method. Even the silent people. Sometimes they're shy. I try to get them out of their shyness, if I can. Sometimes they're just unprepared. They can learn from listening, at least. I like that.

TSISMENAKIS: Why did you decide to focus on early American history?

CAVANAGH: I didn't, actually. The field that I stressed with John Richard Alden at Duke was Revolutionary-era history. And then I took a good course with him in colonial America. And did teach these at the University of Tennessee, and I taught there for four years in the sixties. But I began—in the eighties—by that time I'd branched out into other fields. And you know I had my own master's in Civil War Reconstruction history, but they didn't know that. My PhD was in the Revolutionary War-era history and colonial background to it with Professor Alden.

So I had two different degrees. And I used to teach, and still do actually, both of those fields, including colonial America, for that matter, which I can do with my eyes closed. I love that stuff. And I bridged the gap between the Revolutionary era and the Civil War with that course on the early nation, from Washington to the Civil War.

But I began, before the eighties, actually, to think that behind the trees in the colonial and Revolutionary War era world, were people who were invisible and deemed to be hostile. They were the Native Americans. And I only got, in those early readings in graduate school, bits and snips about the Natives and Indians, so-called. And I was fascinated by them. I began to develop that fascination, and introduce them into my regular courses. And then I began to think, I've got to introduce a course, a two-semester course, in fact, on Native Americans. I launched it about 1993, having already in 1989 launched a course on Mesoamerica and on the Mexicans from the Conquest of 1519 on to the present. That interest was stirred up at Duke, because there's a wonderful center there for Hispanic studies and Mexican history, and Latin America, I'll say, in general. And I got kind of exposed to that in the sixties.

So it was always latently something that I wanted to bring out as a course. And it took a sabbatical for each of these two to be developed. A sabbatical for the Mesoamerican Mexico since 1519 courses, and a sabbatical to prepare the Native American courses. But I'd already done preparation before I took the sabbatical in each case. And developed, for the first time in Suffolk's history, four courses, two for each of these two areas. Introduced them between '89 and '93. And they've become extremely popular. Of course, they're taken for diversity purposes. Multi-cultural history. I attract a group of people, a wide group, and my Mexico and Mesoamerican courses attract many Latin American students. My Native American course attracts, in fact, so-called Indian students, part Indian. They exist around us. These two areas, especially the latter, are not taught as much as they should be taught.

TSISMENAKIS: Do you have any figures in history that you are especially fond of? That you admire?

CAVANAGH: Yeah. For instance, in the world of nineteenth-century Mexico, I've become very enamored of the complexity of and the deep fascination I have for Benito Juarez. He was the leader of Mexico's liberals, and leading the government in parts of the 1860s and 1870s. A fascinating man. I also have a great interest in Abraham Lincoln. Now both these men came from poverty. Literally. And those two contribute meaningfully to the histories of their respective nations. And they actually wrote to each other, because they lived at the same time. Correspondence exists between the two presidents. I think it's not so much the rags to riches aspect that I like—that's always interesting—but it's the capacity that each had to articulate ideas which were, in many cases, ahead of the times. And impacted favorably upon each respective nation.

TSISMENAKIS: Have you written any books or publications?

CAVANAGH: Yeah. I write, generally, what I call long essays. In three cases, they're parts of published books. In one case, it's a little booklet, forty pages, which I use in one

of my courses. It's about the ratification of the U.S. Constitution by North Carolina. It's a monograph that's never been done before. It's a forty-pager with about ten pages of notes. (laughs) Did it on commission for fourteen thousand dollars by the State of North Carolina. And I spent a long time preparing and writing it. It was published and used in the bicentennial of the ratification of the Constitution by North Carolina. And I use it in several of my courses. I like that little book—that little publication very much.

I've written book reviews for the American Historical Association journal [*American Historical Review*], and for the *William and Mary Quarterly*. Two leading journals in my fields. I am not published in Native American or Mesoamerican. For Mexican history, I simply haven't had an opportunity to take the time out to do the necessary research. I would characterize myself as an undergraduate teacher in these subjects.

But I'm happy with the response I get in these. I have lots of Native American tie-ins with the course. We go to—first, is the Peabody Museum at Harvard and we see some exhibits. And I'm taking them next year to the Museum of Fine Arts to see some things there on Native Americans. And the same is true of the Mesoamericans. In both cases, museum trips.

With the Mexico Since the Conquest course, I take my class, those that can go, on a Saturday in a couple of cars, or maybe we get eight to ten people out of twenty-three or so, twenty-four, to go to Dartmouth College and see the great murals there by José Clemente Orozco. They're in the basement of Baker Library. And they fill long, long walls and side walls with this marvelous kind of story of civilization through the eyes of this left-wing muralist of great importance, [especially for] twentieth century Mexican history. Diego Rivera and he, and I think Siqueiros, are the three great muralists of that time. And for this man to have this work so close by, we can do it in two hours Saturday morning, come back in the afternoon, have lunch at Hanover. Students never fail to be impressed with this magnificent mural. They're from floor to ceiling. They're enormous.

A professor of mine at Dartmouth, Jerry Lathrop, taught me art history in the 1950s. In 1990, before he died about two years later—he was in his early nineties then—he agreed to conduct my class through the murals at Dartmouth. And I had a great time with that experience. Learned from him a great deal. I had that happen to me in the 1950s also. But after his demise, I began to give the interpretation myself. And prepared them for the trip and the viewing before they even left here. And that's been very rewarding to me.

TSISMENAKIS: What one period, person or event in history would you say is the most unknown, misunderstood, or unappreciated?

CAVANAGH: I would not define it as a person. Period I would, maybe. But it's really a theme. I think that underappreciated and underexposed to the Americans who live in our country as students is [the history] of the Mexicans or Hispanics, we'll say, and that of the Native Americans. They're almost the same thing. Because the Mestizos are of course a mixture of original Asian inhabitants here—the first immigrants to America were from Asia—and I just am glad to plug that hole at Suffolk. It's not being plugged elsewhere quite so rapidly.

About ten years ago, a Boston University student was able to take my course at Suffolk in Native American history, both semesters, and get credit for it at his own university. It was amazing that he could do this, because they didn't have one at the time. I'm not sure if they have one now or not. But there's the areas that I think need to be paid more attention to by our scholars across the nation. And this multi-cultural diversity theme is so important.

In California, in about seven or eight years from now, will be predominantly, more than half, Hispanic. And I think the culture of this world is something that is by now, I hope in California, being taught and understood and appreciated. As for Native Americans, I think they're rare to find in certain parts in the country. They're more (inaudible) given as course materials in the southwest and middle south, Oklahoma to New Mexico. But in New England, I think there should be more of those kinds of courses.

TSISMENAKIS: So you taught at the University of Tennessee before you came to Suffolk?

CAVANAGH: I did indeed, from 1965 to '69. And would have stayed probably longer, but my wife at the time was accepted to and entered Harvard Law School, so I moved to Boston in 1969 with her, of course. And while she attended law school the first year, I did some research, having not found a job. When I saw a job opening in 1970 in the spring at Suffolk, the Department of History, I answered that invitation. I was one of a handful of applicants, and was hired. And was hired actually, they told me this at the time, because they wanted somebody who could teach both surveys of American and European history, the first year at least. And that's hard to find one person doing that. It's a small department.

I happened to have been allowed to teach one each of those surveys at Duke University. I taught there for two semesters as an instructor, and was given both courses. They had a lot of faith in me, I think. And I found that on my dossier, on my resume, that helped land me the job. I also was told that they wanted somebody to come in who had the ability to be a chair. They were on the verge of retiring the oldies, the older oldies, who were teaching at that time. And that I was to be chair within a couple of years. And it was the case.

So that's the way I got my foot in the door, and then began to do some scouting for other people that I thought should be in our department. And [I] was the person that found both David Robbins² and Kenneth Greenberg³. And they were hired by the school. I presented them as my candidates of choice. I'm proud of that, too. They've done both legion work here. Enormous.

² David Robbins is associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Suffolk University.

³ Kenneth Greenberg is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Suffolk University.

TSISMENAKIS: How many years did you serve as chair of the history department here at Suffolk?

CAVANAGH: Fifteen. From '72—that summer, July first, I was made chair—to June thirtieth of 1987. I enjoyed it. It was a lot of work. But it was time for me to build the department. And I put in the effort and did add some interesting people.

TSISMENAKIS: Do you remember what your first day of teaching was at a college or university level?

CAVANAGH: Oh, okay. I can't think about prep school then. (laughter)

TSISMENAKIS: If you'd like.

CAVANAGH: Oh well, I was, I think at the time, I entered my first prep school class in the fall of 1956 in Dublin, New Hampshire. The Dublin School for Boys is now the Dublin School. It's gone co-ed, so to speak. And it's got about eighty or ninety students. There were about seventy then. And I was only roughly five years older than my seniors. (laughs) And I was a little bit apprehensive, to say the least.

But when I went into my first Duke class in 1963, I don't know why but I kind of loved it. I love Duke anyway. It was my favorite school of my three for many reasons. But I felt at home. I'd taken courses at Duke already and I knew the professors. And I knew many students. And some of them who came to my class were ones I'd already been introduced to. We'd already had a course together because at Duke, graduate students often are placed in the same upper level courses, similar to—including—with undergraduates. So I was at home base, kind of. I was perfectly at ease about all of this.

And yet, what I was doing at Duke, was preparing laboriously a lecture for each class, staying up late at night. And delivering these things as if they were the best thing that'd ever come down the Pike [Massachusetts Turnpike], I guess. And I later, then, adjusted it

at Suffolk, really, after Tennessee in the meantime, to the discussion technique. I was not confident enough that I could have discussions right away at Duke. This was survey work. And survey courses often involve lectures.

At Suffolk, my survey courses—I kept one alive, all these thirty-six years. That's the Western Civ. I like that course very much. And I intersperse lectures, which I try to revise constantly. And I'm doing it this very spring. I like fine tuning them. I don't like the idea of putting lecture notes into a cabinet drawer and letting them get yellow with age. And people just reading them to students, and it's really an abomination because students can read for themselves. They can be given lectures in packets and then discuss the theme per chance.

But I found this to be true at Suffolk. I intersperse discussion sessions with lectures. And opened the lectures to possible questions, challenges, whatever. And the discussions were always said to be the favorite part of the course by students who responded, at least those ones who were the most accomplished. You see, the survey course at Suffolk usually attracts a lot of freshman and sophomores who are green, coming from high schools where they had maybe not the greatest preparation in history. Especially Western Civ. And so I tried, one semester, recently, to have the entire Western Civ. class engage itself in discussion. And they gladly came together, having read what I assigned.

I found out within a week and a half, that they weren't reading. Didn't expect to read. I'd always suspected that. I'm not naïve. I realized that a young class, especially, of first and second year people here is probably not the place you're going to get a lot of discussion. My upper level courses are attracting mainly juniors and seniors, and some sophomores, and they're more capable of doing it and they respond to my challenge of doing it. So I reverted that course attempt last year actually, in Western Civ, to the method of mixing some lectures with some discussions, and two different books. One book was filled with articles and essays for discussion purposes, the other one was a kind of a text book. And it works pretty well.

And I'm very aware of the fact that Suffolk does take in students who are marginal. I think they represent economic contributors to our budget, which is true of any school, of course. But I think sometimes, the weaker students I have really aren't up to college level material in some cases. Or challenges. And I'm very frank about that. But I'm also nurturing. I tell them about the Ballotti Center⁴, and I write all kinds of comments on their quizzes and their midterms to suggest they can come and see me. In the survey course especially. And often times they're shy about coming to see me. And reluctant. I suggest I can give them some ideas about what they could do more effectively than what they're doing at the present. I think they already realize that. They're embarrassed somewhat.

Working, therefore, with that part of the class, maybe one third of each of these Western Civ. survey course classes, is challenging. And I have to go what I can. And I don't happen to be a great inflator, so they do flunk and get D's. And that, of course, upsets them, and they really never quite get the message, I don't think, about the importance of coming to class regularly, reading the assignments regularly. Of being prepared for the quizzes when we give them in the discussion sessions.

Two thirds of those classes, though, do that pretty darn well. But I don't have this weak element in other courses. I have it mostly in this Western Civ. And I'm not going to be discouraged by it. I keep on trying to work at it and trying to help them help themselves. I send, occasionally, students sometimes to counseling, but that's something that I can recommend and they very seldom, apparently, follow through with it.

I'm proud of one thing I did last year. I wrote a five-page kind of essay on some thoughts about grade inflation at Suffolk University, and what we can do about it, if anything. I attracted twenty-one people to a session on March 1, 1905 [sic-2005]. Faculty members. I was preaching to the converted to an extent who agreed with me about grade inflation, but we all seemed to agree that we weren't very sanguine about it going away very fast.

⁴ The Ballotti Learning Center is an on-campus resource that provides academic support for Suffolk University students.

But I maintained standards all these years; I know what a D and an F are, and I don't balk at giving them if they're deserved and earned. And I also can be gloriously happy when I get people to improve from C to B, B to A, through my intervention and encouragement. That's the real reward in teaching.

TSISMENAKIS: One could explain your teaching style as extemporaneous, and containing some theatrics. What kind of role does that play in the classroom? Does it make it more entertaining for the students?

CAVANAGH: Yes. It's a plus. I had some stonewall, deadwood teachers at Dartmouth—plus it's hard, I mean, Dartmouth's hard—who should've been retired in the funny farm. There weren't very many of them, but there were some. And they weren't in history, necessarily, they were other courses. They didn't have any theatrics. And they were monotone in their delivery. And they didn't give you any kind of encouragement about what to expect on an exam, they didn't give you any kind of hints, which I think are important. It doesn't mean that you're going to get an A because you have the hints ahead of time. It means you're going to be more directed in your study, and not waste time scattering your attention over every direction.

But these professors made me realize what I didn't want to be. And yet I had several at Dartmouth that were very inspiring. And the same is true of David Donald and Theodore Ropp. They're dramatic without meaning to be, they're just full of enthusiasm for their subject. They mean to have fun while they're doing something very important too. That's my feeling. And so I got my role models from graduate school. It took that I had a darn good professor at Dartmouth in military history, and it combined with David Donald at Columbia. That's why I got into military history early on.

I finally decided that I had enough war for my life, and that applies to Iraq and Afghanistan, of course. And shied away from it. I decided I would have it incorporated in the courses where it's necessary, like Civil War and Reconstruction, but I didn't want to

do military history as a field anymore. I wanted to do things like Native American, which is full of warfare, I might add. Euro-Americans and Native Americans warred constantly.

And when I give that course, at least, I try to put myself inside the mindset of the Native American. It's the important thing to do. In the context around me, that gives fairness to both sides—if you say both sides, you might mean many sides. There's also African Americans and Native Americans, and Euro-Americans involved in this mix. And the African Americans and Native Americans took common cause more than not, made common cause. But by taking the point of few of the Native American as much as I can, it exposes the student to something that they probably, he or she, never has had done before. They always get this from usually the Euro-American historians' point of view. But there were many very enlightened modern historians writing on Native American history, which they were exposed to in my courses. And I want them to see both sides of all these issues. When I was in college, I didn't get both sides delivered very effectively.

And with regard to Mexican history, I also take the part of the Mexicans, just for the sake of giving something to them which they wouldn't ordinarily have in this country, I don't think. Perhaps they do in some cases. I'm sure they must. But taking the part of the Mexican, like Benito Juarez, this great leader, liberal leader in the mid-nineteenth century, I can tell them about how their history can take a turn for the better, as I see it. It's not always increasingly more and more enlightened and improved. No, that's not the way history works. But at least doing something for the benefit of all, or of most people, to my thinking, is much better than having things done for the benefit of the wealthier classes. The people in the military. Business interests. Oil interests, now. Lincoln and Juarez were people who felt for the great mass of people. And that's one of the things that I feel for.

(pause—tape change)

TSISMENAKIS: What kind of role do lectures play when one studies history? Maybe not necessarily the student—as a professor, as just an admirer of history, what kind of role do the lectures play in that?

CAVANAGH: A couple of roles. One positive, and one negative. The positive role is for the general public, they flock to hear lecturers give them some kind of synthesis of a period or a person. And they're learning for the first time, and they're exposed to new possibilities about pursuing that interest. And the lecturers in some cases, in universities or in public domain, can be entertaining. It's wonderful. And make them laugh. And the premise in all this, though, is that what is being said is pretty much the way things are. And expected to be understood and to be believed.

David McCullough wrote a book on John Adams recently. A best seller. Off the charts. Historians are envious. But he was very sympathetic to this topic. I think in so being sympathetic, he at least, at the same time, exposed hundreds of thousands of Americans, literally, to John Adams, who would never have read a monograph by me or anybody else if I'd written one. But the sympathetic approach he takes is a whitewash to a large extent. And I could explain that, but not necessarily right here.

The negative side's coming out here, for lecturers in college classrooms. If the lecturer is simply synthesizing something as the only way you should think about this topic, and if you don't memorize it, and it's going [to harm you] on the exams, you're not going to do very well. And that's just, to me, criminal, because when a lecture just has people taking notes, they're like scribes; it goes in their ears and down through their pencil or pen, and onto the paper. The books are closed to the exam, the midterm, say, and they're opened and crammed into your head. And then you take the exam, and after the exam is over, you forget all about it. The mind's not being used at all, except as a conduit. People don't really think for themselves.

So a good lecture should not pretend to be the last word. It should raise questions that can't be answered on the spot. Thought questions come to mind about the real

importance, the impact of Marx and Lenin. Or Native Americans and their treatment at the hands of Euro-Americans. It's a two-sided situation of course. It has to be balanced. But you should provoke thought in the lecture. And not just kind of rattle off your version of event number one, two, three, four, up to a thousand and two thousand in a couple of hours or whatever. That's a big yawn.

Because I don't think any professor, no matter how accomplished, except the ones who are doing fresh research and have something really new to kind of push back the frontiers of knowledge—only this latter group, I think, can really enlighten anybody with something really fresh. And lecture in general synthesizes a lot of old stuff. Hopefully entertainingly, but still. Plus it's very enlightened, and put to them is not the entirely agreed upon set of events and interpretations as presented. It's actually open to being challenged. Unless that's done, it really is a disservice to try to convince them that what you think about history is the only way to think about it. That's not right. And yet it's done. I avoid that in my lecture tips. And so I don't think people should dictate to others. I think they should enable others to think for themselves and have a conversation, or a dialogue.

I do reserve, though, a special kind of admiration for historians who have something new to report on. And I'll flock to them. And it might be the first time that anybody's ever thought about something the way they're going to present it. And I like that. And they don't expect to be the last word. History's rewritten every generation. But they're provocative enough to make the listeners think about the topic in a new way. Of course, the public always likes to flock to see somebody who's entertaining, and talks about a topic and they leave feeling comfortable. And they don't really think about it very much, really, later. I guess I had that done to me occasionally when I was an undergraduate, and I didn't find it very satisfying.

TSISMENAKIS: What do you want to achieve? Or what do you want a student to achieve that takes a course of yours?

CAVANAGH: Oh that's easy to answer. I already touched upon it, I think, today. I want to enable them to have confidence in their own opinions, if they read, and take part in discussion. Or at least listen to it attentively. I want to enable them to think for themselves, and not be afraid to put something down on a test or a quiz that isn't what I said they should believe. And if they can make a point of view, an interpretation, a thesis, with their own supporting evidence, I will respect it, no matter what it happens to be. It needn't be what I think at all about these things.

And I am constantly learning from students, by the way. I've never frozen my thoughts about anything. I'm very fluid. It's a very important thing to try to be. People that burn out in universities, not just here but any place, are in ruts, usually if they're in history and if they do lectures—I'm afraid they do at these larger universities because they have huge classes.

I was given a class of ninety once, and I had to lecture to them, and I had to be somewhat more emotive and dramatic, I guess, than usual. And I did pretty well, I think. But it was all a lecture. And I hadn't quite developed some of these thoughts I'm sharing with you today about history being multi-faceted more than I thought at that time. But I want them to feel they can speak out in class and not be criticized because of what they say, their interpretation. It's perfectly valid. I don't think I'm sort of brainwashed in any particular personal persuasion. I give them opportunities to be exposed to new ideas.

And I tell them all, always, at the beginning of the course, that if they have had old ideas that are challenged by what they'll be exposed to in the course, I ask them—I invite them to think about these things. Give them some thought. And see if they might modify their own thoughts, possibly. If they don't of course, they're perfectly welcome, as they know, to go back to their own thoughts again. And to preserve them. To retain them.

So I'm opening new possibilities to them, I think, in history. I wish this were done by everybody at every university, but it's not. And my integrity in saying that is backed up by my honesty about academic standards. Suffolk University is a business as well as an

academic institution. I think the bottom line considerations do influence students who are marginal, as I call them, to come here. I'm hopeful at one point that they can be inspired in this setting to really do the best they can with somebody like myself, for instance, trying to urge them on to get into the habit of something they haven't really ever been exposed to maybe in high school or whatever.

But I also am left with the impression that I have a lot of people who are marginal and are going to stay marginal. And so they ought to take the easiest majors—I won't list them right now, I know a couple of them—in our university. And they get through their degree. And their attitude, I'm afraid, is that they're here as clients to purchase their degree on the installment plan. Nothing is more abhorrent to me, nothing, in academe.

TSISMENAKIS: Having been here at Suffolk for so long, what changes have you seen it undergo, major changes, in areas of administration, student population, demographics, and facilities?

CAVANAGH: Wonderful things. We're bigger and better. I've been here thirty-six years and I can see that, sure. We have a marvelous multicultural mix of people from various nations of the world. They're in my classes. I've had Russians, I've had Japanese, Vietnamese student right now, Hispanics, usually some Spaniards every year somewhere in my courses. They come from out of this area, they come from places far away from Boston. That wasn't true in the old days. Pretty much eastern Massachusetts. I liked the students then too, of course, but this is a wonderful mix.

Our majors, by the way, in history, I think, are remarkable. We have about sixty or seventy of them, I think, now. And we're a pretty smart group. There are some people among them who are not as smart as the others, but they're really very inspiring to teach. I think we're lucky. I think English also. This university has a very strong group of majors for students. And I think there are some departments that have rather mediocre majors, [but I won't go further].

So I am perfectly happy with the material that I get in class from—with the exception of these people I feel sorry for in the survey, the newcomers, the freshman, especially, who are green and not prepared to really do college level work. And I find, to my astonishment, that I find in my courses, the survey especially, and sometimes in the Meso-American, which is flocked to by people who don't realize it's a challenging course—that it's not a survey that's easy and kind of simple. I have to disabuse them of that by saying that I don't inflate grades. And sometimes I have a turnover the first week or two that's very healthy for them. They get out of the course, and then their absence is replaced by somebody else, because they're afraid it won't be quite what they had in mind. An easy course. (pauses) Well, next question I guess.

TSISMENAKIS: What direction is Suffolk heading towards? What do you think is its future?

CAVANAGH: Oh, I think the number of really great students here outnumbers the marginals. And it's true at most universities, I guess, except maybe the biggies. But academically, we've got to stay strong, as long as we don't have too much grade inflation in our midst. And I think that is one of the problems that I can't do much about very well. The session last March first was very eye-opening. But that's all part of what's true of Harvard and Princeton, for that matter, too. They have grade inflation problems, and they're trying to deal with them, and we should do more than we are about that.

But I see a great future for us. We have more facilities, more options. Wonderful new expansion of new departments, actually, and opportunities. And this is a place that I really, truly appreciate. I've been here thirty-six years and I've seen it grow and improve, and I'm incredibly proud of this whole operation. I can't emphasize that more. And I think I'm trying to keep up the academic standards of the university, but I can't do it alone. And I have many colleagues that can help me. I'm sure I could get probably the majority of our faculty to help.

But I think students—with the dorms especially, now attracting students from out of state, this is a very good environment. And I do all I can to give them experiences outside the classroom myself. And taking them on trips to museums and Dartmouth College for the Orozco murals, because we have no campus. But we're getting one, actually, now. We had no campus until these dorms. And we're still an urban university, and so we should have opportunities for our students, in the classroom and outside the classroom both. And I try to do that in most of my courses. And it's an interesting thing to do. It takes more time outside, but that's what I'm willing to expend for their enlightenment, if I can make that the bottom line of all this effort.

TSISMENAKIS: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

CAVANAGH: Nope. (laughs)

TSISMENAKIS: Alright. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

CAVANAGH: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW