When I was asked to write the original proposal for the third book in the series,” Noverr says, “it spanned the end of Peter McPherson’s presidency until 2004. But then I thought, how could I possibly find the time as a department chair—I was an associate dean and chair of Spanish and Portuguese at the time—and I decided I couldn’t. So I bowed out.

“But then, as the years went by, ‘the bus went around the block,’ and I was still standing at the stop, and I got back on the bus.”

That was 2011, and Noverr says the additional time provided him with “a little more distance from events in order to position myself better to research and write the book, as well as more time each day to actually do the writing” (10-14 hours a day).

He adds that he also had to pick up a little bit of Lou Anna K. Simon’s presidency from the standpoint of her involvement in the sesquicentennial. Feeling it not right and proper to write about a sitting president, Noverr says he concentrated on Simon’s role primarily as provost and vice president before that.

“Along the way, I learned there are politics in practically everything you say, and sensitivities around the University’s ‘status,’ reputation, and all that.”

Noverr notes that he has been on the MSU campus since 1970, except for a year in Poland as a Fulbright professor. He did his undergrad and began teaching as a grad at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant. After a year as an instructor, he left for Miami of Ohio and was there three years before coming to MSU in 1970, finishing his dissertation and graduating in December 1972.

Technically speaking, Doug Noverr’s new book, The Rise of a Research University and the New Millennium, 1970-2005 (which is the third volume in a series by different authors chronicling Michigan State University history), covers Clifton Wharton’s presidency through the 2005 sesquicentennial. But, Noverr says, it occasionally reaches back to the 1940s and ’50s, too.

Putting it All Together

Douglas A. Noverr

The Rise of a Research University and the New Millennium, 1970-2005

“Along the way, I learned there are politics in practically everything you say, and sensitivities around the University’s ‘status,’ reputation, and all that.”
As for what he enjoyed most about the MSU history volume project, Noverr quickly replies, “Putting the picture together; putting it ALL together. Because it was an era of phenomenal growth; of incredible growth in the undergraduate and graduate population, programs, students. We put ourselves in the position of being the sixth-largest producer of PhDs in the country. You don’t really have a picture of what’s going on while it’s happening. You don’t see outside of your own self-interest (at least until you get tenure).”

TIME IS LIMITED

Adds Noverr, “In a way, I was writing about my own history; about all the things I didn’t see; that I didn’t have the time to pay attention to. While things are happening around us, people are always limited by where they’re at in their careers.

“But then, that’s true about life in general. We simply do not have the time to read; to get all of the factual information about everything.”

When he came to MSU, Noverr says there was a group of faculty that he got to know that welcomed him to campus.

“I learned so much from them, but I wanted to learn and know more. For me, it’s always been about people; about individuals and personalities. This includes people who thought they were ‘just passing through,’ and decided to stay because they wanted to make a contribution to the place.”

Noverr reiterates his point about gaining knowledge on “how political this place can be at various periods of time for various reasons.”

“That was one of the biggest surprises as I researched the book. Some of that is due to the physical closeness and personal ties to the legislature that, over the years, presented both some difficulties and some opportunities.”

Another surprise, Noverr says, “is what this university has been able to accomplish in building research facilities, and convincing amazing people like Henry Blosser to come here.” (Blosser was a pioneer in the field of accelerator physics and was the founding director of Michigan State University’s National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory).

“The State of Michigan was willing to support the university’s growth, and we had federal money, too. Until there came, of course, ‘trouble in paradise,’ and funding became more difficult for the State.”

Adds Noverr, “The financial side is a huge part of the story. How much has been done – how much has been accomplished at MSU given the resources available to it – is directly attributed to the people who are dedicated to this institution.”

Noverr notes, “Another surprise for me was how far back the commitment MSU has to affirmative action and diversity goes. That’s not to say that the university always ‘did the right thing,’ but the commitment was there very early on.”

GRATEFUL FOR HELP

As for those who helped him complete the book, Noverr is ever grateful.

“Portia Vescio in MSU Archives did a fantastic job both making information available online and in hard copies. Just having the board of trustees minutes available online now was a great help.

“And Derrick Turner and his fellow photographers in University Photographic Services were great to work with as I searched for just the right images to include in the book.”

As for the rest of the story, Noverr suggests: “Read the book!”