To hear Professor Ritchie Lowry's personal history is to gain insight into American history itself - from World War II to the current recession - and to understand the growth of Boston College from a local campus to one with national gravitas. Lowry's life and career also illustrate a particular approach to social change, one that is nuanced, strategic, and realistic, based on the reconciliation of divergent perspectives. In this sense, his ideas offer a kind of corrective not only to specific problems in contemporary America, but to the ideological purity that has made those problems so difficult to solve.

Professor Lowry was in the Navy in the Pacific Theater during World War II, spent a year and a half working for an international company in Japan, and used the GI bill to attend UC Berkeley. He was recruited into the sociology Ph.D. program there, and examined in his dissertation the ineffectuality and alienation caused by the failure of communication between leadership groups in Chico, California. This work formed this basis for his first book, Who's Running this Town? Community Leadership and Social Change, and the issues it highlights clearly remain relevant in the current polarized political climate.

While finishing his PhD, Lowry taught at CSU Chico and then moved to DC in the 1960s, swept up by the potential for social and political change in the Kennedy era. From 1964-1966 he was Senior Research Scientist at the Army's Special Operations Research Office. His team, funded to study the Vietnam War, quickly became critics of that war. When their findings went unheeded and their work was widely misreported and censored, Ritchie left DC to rejoin academia.

Despite offers from prominent universities, Lowry was drawn to Boston College, in part because of the ambitious agenda planned by the Jesuits. BC had originally been a small, working-class Catholic college, but after WWII, when post-secondary education became more accessible and affordable, the school lost its niche. The Jesuits realized BC would fail if it didn't become more prestigious, and the AVP at the time, Rev. Charles Donovan, SJ, hired Lowry to help make that happen. “We want you to build the department,” Donovan said, “and if you don’t, we’re going to cancel Sociology.”

Lowry, with his unique combination of idealism and realism and his remarkable talent for strategizing, was the perfect candidate to transform the department and advance the university's aims. Even as a new professor, he spoke with the administration about the “tradition” of segregating classes by gender, and managed to integrate classrooms virtually overnight. A year after his hire he was appointed as Department Chair, and during his tenure (1967-1970), Lowry, Severyn Bruyn and others determined that the department would distinguish itself from other sociology departments by basing the program on the Jesuit’s own mission: social and economic justice. Not only was BC sociology unique in its substantive focus, but the faculty had committed to being “multi-theoretical,” willing to abide any theoretical perspective.

As his dissertation had theorized, tolerance and flexibility resulted in a high level of effectiveness: during his 3-year tenure, Lowry oversaw the hiring of five new faculty members and hosted distinguished visiting professors Ben Alper and Everett C. Hughes. He recruited resources and students and obtained approval for a Ph.D. program, which began in 1970 and has since seen nearly 200 people achieve their doctorates. He's even responsible for our enviable location on the 4th floor of McGuinn. All of us are indebted to Ritchie for his dedication and talent for political maneuvering in the early days of the department. “You think Washington is something!” he says. “You've got to try academic politics!”

Along with teaching courses and helping to build the department, Lowry has continued to research, publish, and engage in activism. The most recent of his seven published books, Good Money: a Guide to Profitable Social Investing in the '90s, and his associated for-profit business, Good Money, Inc., continue his attempt to effect change by reconciling opposing practices - in this case, by making and encouraging socially responsible investments within a capitalist framework. Once again, his combination of realism and idealism has turned out to be successful: when the market crashed, Lowry's socially responsible investments dipped slightly, bounced back, and are now higher than ever.

The money has enabled Lowry to establish an extremely generous new fellowship (a projected $250,000) to support ongoing graduate student research in two areas he believes are crucial to society's future: social economy and the proper use of military force. After a year of research and then “retirement,” he also plans to update his public policy book and write A Citizen's Guide to Military Force, while continuing to teach his seminar on the Roots of War. Just as he played a prominent role in building the department in the past, Ritchie continues to support and influence its development in the future; funding, mentoring, and teaching students while engaging in research and activism that are relevant to and potentially transformative of the most central and contentious issues of our time.