

3-4-2003

Vicki Ahrens oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, March 4, 2003

Vicki Ahrens (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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Current Position: Left USF in 1994

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg
Location of Interview: Tampa
Campus Library

Date of Interview: April 3, 2003
Editor: Danielle E. Riley

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Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

She came to USF in 1969 as a student. She later became a staff member in 1974 and left USF in June of 1994.

Circumstances that brought her to USF

“At that time, in the late 1960s, there were not as many choices in Florida as there are now. There were only four universities in the state: USF, FSU, UF, and FAMU. USF was the new kid on the block. Being the first kid in my family to ever think about college, I tried to do something totally different. So, I selected USF. Nobody else I knew was coming here. I thought I would give it a try. And I set out from my home town of Miami,” states Vicki Ahrens.

What did USF look like in 1969?

“It looked a lot different than it does now. I’m struck every time I return to the campus since I’ve been gone at the drastic and dramatic physical changes. Fowler Avenue was two lanes. There was one single restaurant where the University Mall is now and one hotel and then USF. And that was all that was on Fowler. Fletcher Avenue was also two lanes with very little there. The first fast food restaurants were on 56th Street. It took a while for them to get on Fowler,” she states.

Were there a lot of students when she first arrived, and what was on-campus life like?

“It was really very small then. It had a small school atmosphere. That was one of the things I liked about USF. You could really have an impact on shaping the traditions of the school. We had just opened the Andros dorms. I was among the first group to live in Kappa Hall. Dorm government was big and the on-campus community was very close. There were a lot of relationships between faculty and staff and students. And there were a lot of expectations among faculty and staff that they would interact with students. It was very much a collegial environment. USF was very small feeling and acting, and yet USF was getting bigger and bigger primarily from the commuter students that lived in the Tampa Bay area. You could get heavily involved in campus activities. At the same time, USF had a wide variety of majors and career choices that really only a large university could offer,” states Ahrens.

Women's issues at USF in 1969?

As an undergraduate student, she remembers the issue of visitation in residence halls about men being able to visit and go into women's dorms. She says that the issue was a hot topic then. She recalls that a local dignitary referred to dorms as "taxpayers' whore houses." "There was a great cry among the female students and demonstrations about being able to maintain the opportunity to have guests in the halls," states Mrs. Ahrens. She was a member of a sorority and virtually everyone in the sorority was an education major, which she says was a traditionally female discipline.

Time period in history when she was an undergrad—how did it affect her and others

She was an undergraduate from 1969 to 1973, during which time, she says, opportunities for women opened up. "It was a fascinating time to be on a college campus. USF was growing. You have women's issues coming to the forefront. It was the Vietnam War era. A lot of student activism. All the guys were registered for the draft. There was the whole issue of when they graduated what was their lottery number and how soon would they be drafted. The time period shaped a generation. The little period of time from the mid 60s to the mid 70s made a difference for women, for people, for political activism and what young people can do to change the world," she states.

Traditional college activities in a non-traditional setting

She came to USF right out of high school and graduated in four years. She was involved in traditional college things, such as dorm government, student government, and a sorority. She says her involvements were traditional, but in a non-traditional setting, which she thought was fun.

Diversity on campus

There was relatively little diversity on campus at that time. She says there were a handful of blacks. She does not recall how large or small the Spanish population was on campus. She grew up with them in Miami, so Spanish people did not stand out to her.

After graduating in 1973—Mrs. Ahrens begins working for USF in 1974 at a new office that USF had just opened—Office of New Student Relations

After getting her undergraduate degree, she began a professional career at USF in 1974. At this time, USF had just opened a new office called the Office of New Student Relations. It was focused on the recruitment of students. There were three primary staff members. One staff member recruited minorities, with a focus on blacks. One staff member recruited the traditional age freshmen, and the other staff member recruited the non-traditional age students. Mrs. Ahrens says 1974 was the first time USF took a real comprehensive look at the makeup of the student body. She says USF saw areas that it needed to make a commitment in, and decided to focus on them. "With the state system of Florida the way it is, USF has always been relatively full at the junior-senior level because so many students go to community colleges and then transfer to a university. So, this was the first time in really focusing on traditional freshmen students, reaching out to students at a non-traditional age, and focusing on freshmen minorities," states Mrs. Ahrens.

What kinds of courses did she take as an undergraduate student?

She came to USF as a math major. She thought she would be a math teacher. She took general education courses. Then she hit her first quarter of calculus. USF went on quarter semesters then. Her instructor was a graduate student. She says he wrote on and filled up every chalkboard in the room. Mrs. Ahrens says it was way too theoretical for her. She backed off of math and chose a different area to study. She changed her major several times at USF.

What were the sizes of classrooms then?

She says the classes were small then. “We didn’t have the lecture halls that exist now, because the buildings simply weren’t there. There was one lecture room in the College of Fine Arts and one in the Physics Building. Since there were not a lot of large classrooms, there were not many large classes. Teaching assistants taught all of the freshman classes, so this has been a standard in higher education for years; even as a young institution USF was establishing graduate programs,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Describing interactions among students and faculty

Mrs. Ahrens states that back then all student organizations were required to have an advisor from the faculty or staff. The advisor was the students’ link to the administration. “Staff members took the role of advisor very seriously. They became a mentor to the student organizations. We had a fair number of freshmen mixers or student mixers where faculty and staff would chaperone. It was very community-oriented. USF had that from the beginning. There was a dean of men and a dean of women. The university acted as local parents. The University staff was very involved in the well being of students. They considered it their personal obligation, not only with academic development, but also with the social and personal development of students,” she says.

Mrs. Ahrens becomes a staff member in 1974—student interactions now as a staff member

When she became a staff member of USF in 1974, she was expected to participate in student activities. She would be there to meet new students at different events, and welcome and support them. “Back then the leadership came out of the Division of Student Affairs. It was very student-oriented. They were the center of the institution and undergraduate students were the center of the institution. Great deal of warm and fuzziness. It was very nice to walk into a classroom building and say hello to a lot of faculty members, not only because they were an instructor but because they were a chaperone at a dance, or a student advisor, and what not,” says Mrs. Ahrens.

Kappa Hall—dorm life in 1969

Mrs. Ahrens remembers that Kappa Hall looked like a concrete block in 1969. It had small rooms. The lobby was furnished with Danish modern furniture, which was burnt orange, and shag carpet. It was very 1960s. In her freshman year, from 1969 to 1970, Kappa Hall and all residence halls had a sign-in and sign-out process. “In the lobby, there was a metal card slot with a punch card for every resident of the building. You clocked in when you left, and when you came back. There was a person on duty in the lobby, 24 hours a day. You had to show your I.D., and punch-in and punch-out. Guests

had to be escorted. They would call you from the lobby and say you had a visitor. It was a very controlled environment,” says Mrs. Ahrens. She says there were no specific hours they had to obey at night, but the resident assistants were always aware of who was in the dorm, and who was not. She says they wanted to make sure everyone was okay. She also states that everyone had to be on a meal plan. “So everyone ate together. This created a lot of interaction. All the resident assistants and resident instructors ate in the resident halls. You knew virtually everyone. It created a great sense of community,” says Mrs. Ahrens. The residents were not allowed to open windows or paint the walls. She thought she lived in a nice dorm, since it was air-conditioned. She says not all residence hall facilities at the state universities were air-conditioned. “That was one of the selling points for USF and the residence halls, that they were all air-conditioned. In Florida, that becomes a selling point,” states Mrs. Ahrens. She also says the dorms were carpeted, modern, nice and new in comparison to others dorms at state universities.

What was the dorm food like?

Mrs. Ahrens states, “The food was about the same as it is now. It just was not a big deal. In those days you just ate what was offered to you. It was not a big deal. It was just the way it was. People did not get uptight about it. It was like, today I like what they have; today it is not so good, oh well.” She says it was the standard institutional food.

Atmosphere in the cafeteria

She says certain groups, fraternities, sororities, or other student organizations each had their own area in the cafeteria. She says there was a lot of affiliation occurring. “A lot of rushing occurred informally at the meal functions, as people would come to lunch and dinner. It was a very collegial environment,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Which sorority was Mrs. Ahrens in, and what were the sororities like at USF?

Mrs. Ahrens was in Kappa Delta. She found her involvement in a sorority to be one of the most significant experiences that she had. She says that was because USF did not have the traditional fraternity or sorority housing. The sorority membership and involvement at USF was different than at a traditional university. “At other universities, the sorority thing would consume you, and create your life. You would live, eat, and breathe with your sorority sisters. At USF, sororities became a student organization of choice in the same way the Catholic Student Union became an organization of choice. They had to work a lot harder to create the sense of community and sense of sisterhood or brotherhood. It gave individuals the opportunity to do this or that. They had a lot of flexibility. You did not have to be pigeon-holed,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Who was the president in 1969?

The president in 1969 was John Allen. He soon retired after Mrs. Ahrens arrived at USF. His replacement was Cecil Mackey, who became the president around 1971.

Mrs. Ahrens comments on president Cecil Mackey (Who became president around 1971)

“He helped to move USF out of the ‘build it, they will come’ mindset, into the more planned growth development. He gave the impetus to the new Office of Student Relations and helped with developing the recruitment team. He said that we need to have

a comprehensive new student orientation program, which was not the norm at the time. Mrs. Ahrens says USF was really on the cutting edge in regards to its relationships with new students. The new recruitment strategy, the new orientation program, and the concept of the Office of New Student Relations all helped to set USF apart from other state universities at that time, in regards to a university's relationship with new students. Mrs. Ahrens says the Office of New Student Relations wanted to be supportive of new students and make the transition to college easy and positive so that students would stay.

Typical course load in 1969

She says the course loads were no different than they are now. Mrs. Ahrens states that twelve to fifteen hours was the standard for a full-time student. The registration fee for a quarter semester for Florida residents was \$150. Mrs. Ahrens says students could take as many courses as they wanted to for \$150. A couple of years later, there was a great cry when the registration fee was raised to \$180. The per-credit hour charge did not exist then. "Students would do very creative things. They would register for more hours knowing they would not be able to handle the course load. They would register from eighteen to twenty-one credit hours, and then work with faculty to take incompletes in the courses. This would reduce the number of quarters that they had to pay registration fees for," says Mrs. Ahrens.

Registration process in 1969

In 1969, registration was held in the ballroom of the University Center, which is now the Marshall Center. The bookstore was also in the basement of the University Center. In the ballroom, people would pull punch cards to register for classes. "If a class had thirty punch cards in a box, you would go and stand in line. If there was a punch card left, you got it. Then you would gather all your punch cards for all the classes. And sometimes you had to go and exchange your punch card for another one, if you ended up with a conflicting schedule for two classes or something like that. You wrote your name and student number on the punch cards and turned them in. Then they went to some group of people who would do all of the key punching to create the class rolls and generate grade sheets. There were sometimes errors that had to be resolved with the punch cards," states Mrs. Ahrens.

Mrs. Ahrens comments on how registration has changed at USF

"We thought that when USF began to have telephone registration we were at the end of technology and we were the cat's meow. We would never have to have line registration again. And now phone registration is ending because everyone is using computers. There have been such technological changes from 1970 to 1990. USF had to grow to handle registration," she states.

Where did she go to study and socialize?

There was a lot of socializing at the University Center and the library. Each floor of the residence halls had a lounge area where students could gather. The Andros and Argos centers had study lounges. Mrs. Ahrens says there were a lot of outside activities and folk singing. There were singing competitions. She says there were always small groups of people clustered outside under trees. There was recreational drug use occurring. She

says that mostly there was a great deal of small informal gatherings. Student affairs staff members would be out in the same environment as students.

Was there a dress code in 1969? (Dress code and rules change as time was changing)

“People would get yelled at if their shorts were too short. They would have to talk to the dean of student affairs if they got in trouble. Women were still wearing dresses and skirts. But, when I came in the late 60s, we began to see the transition from the university being a place of privilege to it being a place of every man. The university was a place of freedom, of thought, of action, and of speech. The university was trying to determine its goal in supporting students to develop as human beings, and at the same time students demonstrating behavior that was seen as inappropriate. In my freshman year, blue jeans were the standard. We moved into a sloppy stage in a period of about 9 months. When I came back in the fall of 1970, there were no more hours or clock[ing] in and out at the residence halls,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

For students, what was considered discontent and inappropriate behavior in 1969?

Mrs. Ahrens says public affection was not allowed in the residence halls or the lobby. Conversation about affection was not allowed. Walking across campus holding hands was okay, but it was not appropriate to be making-out. Most of the university staff and faculty acted as parents. Mrs. Ahrens recalls her first year at USF, in 1971, was primarily the time when the university acted as parents. Mrs. Ahrens says there were demonstrations about hours, visitations, and dress code. “Because the way the world was, demonstrations were the standard. If you didn’t like something, get a poster, and start marching. People would march about everything. We were really beginning to see the time when students told the university that they wanted more opportunity to control their lives. This was very difficult for traditional staff and faculty and parents, who had sent their children to college thinking that they would be taken care of, and now the university was backing off all this,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Were there demonstrations about Vietnam at USF?

Mrs. Ahrens says there were demonstrations, but they were not very big. “USF was a very accepting environment. If you chose to protest, that was fine, if not that was fine too,” she states. There were candlelight vigils and marches, and sit-ins at the Administration Building. She says the protests or marches never got out of control. She says they were always very peaceful. Mrs. Ahrens says that she did participate in candlelight vigils. She was in school when the Kent State incident occurred. She says Kent State was the impetus for most of the protests at USF. “We did not have university police back then. We just had university security officers—who were not sworn officers of the law. But, they were very careful to let this play-out. The dean of women and the dean of men, and the student affairs staff were very involved in getting people to talk about their thoughts or concerns. The outlet was there for those who felt strongly and wanted to express their opinions about the war and the world,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Were there race relation demonstrations in the late 60’s and early 70’s?

Mrs. Ahrens says there were no race relation demonstrations while she was in school. In the early 1970s, when she was a staff member, more racial tensions existed. She states

that in the 1960s, there was not much racial tension. At this time, USF did not have a lot of minority students. She says the minority students that were at USF blended into the campus life. “Eventually the civil rights unrest did reach Florida. There were some militant black students, and some white students protesting that we did not have more black students. But, not something that made the environment more uncomfortable. It was all very open. You felt like you were sharing this. Protests were always inclusive, not exclusive,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Does she have a favorite memory as a student at USF?

In the fall of 1970, the week before her sophomore year started, she had a fire in her dorm room. It was known as the “Kappa fire.” It was a very big fire, and the first fire that USF had in a building. One of the students that lived next door to her was heavily involved in art. The student had aerosol, paint, and lacer items. The drape was open and the sun came in and reflected off of a magnifying makeup mirror and to the bed. This started the mattress on fire, while they were at lunch. Mrs. Ahrens says she remembers what she had on and what she was doing. All she had with her was her meal card, her I.D., and the clothes on her back. As she left the cafeteria, she saw people filing out of Kappa Hall and laughing because school had not started yet and someone had set off the fire alarm. It turned out that it was a huge fire. Flames were coming out of the second floor room and going up to the third floor. The fire department came. The guy she was dating called a radio show and got \$13.80 for the news tip of the day. “It was scary because you lose everything that you owned. But you saw how the university responded to the incident. There were staff members from student affairs there before the fire department was. We were relocated, taken care of, and given new clothes to wear. The whole sense of community was demonstrated. The director of housing could never look at me again without thinking that I had burned his dorm down,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Recreational drug usage on campus

It was occurring on campus, and she saw it. It was mostly marijuana. USF was on the edge of what was going on. There was a lot of marijuana usage both on and off campus.

The transition from student body to staff at USF

In the summer of 1972, she was in the first group of undergraduate students to be selected as orientation leaders. The new student orientation program was called FOCUS. Twenty undergraduate students were selected to work with small groups of new freshmen throughout the summer as they came on campus for their orientation, academic advising and registration. As an orientation leader, Mrs. Ahrens met the staff that opened the Office of New Student Relations. They offered her the opportunity to be a graduate assistant. In the fall of 1973, she went to graduate school full-time, and worked part-time in the orientation office. She completed her course work for her Master’s degree in secondary education in 1973 and 1974. In the fall of 1974, she began to work full-time as the pre-admission advisor of high school students. Her job was to coordinate the new orientation programs and be responsible for freshman recruitment. Recruiting freshmen entailed taking catalogs and visiting high schools around the state of Florida.

Was it difficult to go from a student to a staff member?

It was not hard for her because she had been so involved with USF as a student. It seemed to be a natural extension of doing something that she really enjoyed—being a student. With her master’s degree being in secondary education, Mrs. Ahrens was not interested in being a teacher. She did not have any idea what she would do after graduating. She says she ended up in the right place at the right time. The job came to her. She did not have to go out looking for a job. With the job, she had a great opportunity to develop a program, participate in the growth of USF, and to pay back USF for what it had done for her by helping others. At her new job there was a new young group of professionals working with each other to create the same environment for students that they had all had as undergraduates.

How are students different now than when she was a student?

“A freshman is a freshman. Regardless of our environment, whether the student is coming to college now because it is an expectation, or then because it was seen as a privilege. I still believe that the freshman experience transcends those generational changes. You only leave home one time. You only go to live in a dorm or an apartment one time. You have that first time sitting in a college classroom. You now have no one to wake you up every morning. I think that you can always relate to freshmen students based on that transition. It is a new phase of life,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Has the student emphasis on freshmen changed since she was advising freshmen in 1974?

“As a university, if we can provide the support system to make the student successful, then we have done our job. Even as students change and experiences change, I was still be able to relate based on that transition. It is a universal transition for freshmen. No matter what was going on in the world at the time, the fall opening semester was the same for everyone. No one knows where to go,” she states. Mrs. Ahrens says the emphasis on incoming freshmen has not been the same since she was working for the Office of New Student Relations. “There is not the same emphasis on the student experience like there once was. There should be. There used to be a freshmen dinner in the Sun Dome. There were a couple of thousand freshmen then, and faculty and staff were expected to be there. I think more emphasis needs to be placed on the student experience,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Mrs. Ahrens describes the freshmen dinner that USF had at the Sun Dome in the early days

She says the dinner was held typically the Saturday night before classes started on Monday. All freshmen were invited. They would get a letter in the summer inviting them to meet the university community at a dinner in their honor. All the student affairs staff and faculty were expected to attend the dinner. It was started in 1981. There was a wine and cheese reception before the dinner for the faculty and staff. Then there was a barbecue dinner, a band, a DJ, and dancing. “It was an evening of informal interaction for the freshmen to meet each other and others in the university community. It was a great thing,” she states.

When and why the freshmen dinner stopped occurring

She says it stopped occurring in the mid to late 1980s, when USF had trouble attracting students to come. She says the summer orientation program, FOCUS, changed its name and direction in the early 1990s. “The focus between 1985 and 1990 was more on reaching the student where they were [*sic*], rather than requiring them to come to us. That’s when you saw the expansion of electronic recruitment materials with things like virtual campus tours. There was a change in philosophy at that point. This is also when we began to do a lot of electronic transcripts and transfers. So we got away from all the manual computation of grade point averages. High schools in Florida were required to be able to transmit their transcripts electronically. You could apply to USF by going to your guidance counselor and authorizing the release of your transcripts. We sent back verification that we had received the transcripts, and this constituted the application. The whole process became more student-focused rather than university-focused; catching people where they were. The freshmen dinner just lost its value,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Technology and population growth of USF from 1969 to 1994 (When she was a student and then a staff member of USF)

Commenting on USF’s growth, she says, “It is just amazing. The regional campus system, the merger with New College, and now their re-independence, but the whole concept of an honors college being part of a state university system, the number of academic building[s] that have been built—it’s almost mind boggling. When USF goes from 5,000 to 35,000 students, the demands on infrastructure were incredible.” Mrs. Ahrens says in the beginning of her career at USF, the process for everything was manual. They had paper transcripts, and manually computed high school grade point averages. They had applications that were coded, and they got sent up stairs to key punchers that would punch in stuff. Every morning in the Office of New Student Relations, Mrs. Ahrens and others would get a large stack of applicants. When they were making an admissions decision, they would go through the book and make changes with a pencil. At the end of the day, the book was sent back up stairs, and the changes to status were key punched again. She says going from that manual process to an on-line system was needed to develop an infrastructure that could support the large increase of students.

Mrs. Ahrens describes the different roles the presidents of USF have played in shaping USF

John Allen

“John Allen, founding president, set the tone for the student-centeredness of the university. That was his thing,” she states.

Cecil Mackey

“Then Cecil Mackey came, and we were getting bigger. We began to act like a teenager. We began to feel our way. We were beginning to challenge UF and FSU for students. We were establishing our own identity separate from that. Like a teenager with a driver’s license, we had a few accidents. Under Cecil Mackey, we had an incredible external focus,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

John Lott Brown

“When Jack Brown came, he focused on technology. His thing was infrastructure. Then Frank Borkowski came,” she says.

Frank Borkowski

“His thing was to be more traditional. So with him we got the decision to do intercollegiate football. He placed an emphasis on improving on-campus living and new residence halls. That began when he came because he came from a more traditional mindset. And he wanted to create more of a traditional student environment on campus. He was student oriented like President Allen,” says Mrs. Ahrens.

Betty Castor

“When Betty Castor came, right before I left, you began to see the political nature of USF emerge based on the experiences that she brought to USF. And again you saw that external focus emerge that we did not have under Borkowski. Her goal was to make USF the university of choice. The whole Research I designation, and lobbying to make sure we got our share,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Judy Genshaft

“And now with President Genshaft, she has inherited a lot of stuff that she has not yet had an opportunity to put her mark on the future of USF, and because she has all this stuff popping up that she has to deal with. Post 9-11 and the Al-Arian issue have put her in a position of having to do some things that no one before her had to deal with,” she says.

Mrs. Ahrens comments on USF’s leadership throughout the years

She says the physical changes to the campus are almost all based on the presidents’ roles. “You can put the growth and development of USF in the context of its leadership. Yet, in many ways USF is still a step-child, and may always be,” she states.

Mrs. Ahrens comments on how football has helped USF

As an alumnus, Mrs. Ahrens has been really excited about the number of USF license tags and paraphernalia and the crowds at football games. “You can go places now where you can get USF clothing, where before you used to be able to only find Gator or Seminole clothing,” she states. Mrs. Ahrens says intercollegiate athletics has played a large role in shaping USF. She says USF needs an alumni population that is out there supporting the university. She believes USF football will help to attract more alumni. “A winning football team is going to attract way more alumni attention than a winning researcher in micro electronics. That is where USF needs to work in its alumni relations, and I think the football program is really going to contribute to that,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

Any last words that Mrs. Ahrens wants to leave behind after being with USF for 25 years, from 1969 to 1994?

“What I would like is for everyone to have as positive of an experience with USF as I had. I want every student to walk out and say, I hate to leave; it has been the most

wonderful time of my life. I would just love to know that our students are getting that kind of experience,” states Mrs. Ahrens.

End of Interview