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## Robert Barylski oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, June 10, 2003

Robert V. Barylski (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
Oral History Program  
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Narrator: Dr. Robert V. Barylski  
Current Position: Faculty Member in USF's  
Department of Government and International  
Relations at the Sarasota Campus  
Editor: Danielle E. Riley  
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg  
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Abstractor: Mary E. Yeary

## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### *Year of arrival*

Dr. Barylski came to USF in February 1979 as dean of the Sarasota campus.

### *Circumstances that brought Dr. Barylski to USF*

The reason the position at the Sarasota campus intrigued him was because it was a blend of two things in his own background that he liked and valued. In Sarasota there was the traditional public university and also a liberal arts college called New College. Dr. Barylski went to Ivy League schools and also grew up in an area where Ivy League schools were prevalent. Then he worked for a state university in New York. "It was the mixture of liberal arts and state university that made the Sarasota campus position intriguing," he says. Dr. Barylski says USF Sarasota had the classical state university programs, while New College had a liberal arts education and individual and innovative learning. He felt he could understand the two institutions and work on the problem of having the two of them work together. When he took the position, Dr. Barylski became the youngest dean of the group of USF deans.

### *How Dr. Barylski heard about USF and the position at the Sarasota campus*

Dr. Barylski heard about the USF position by looking at ads in the Chronicle of Higher Education. His intention was to leave Empire State College in New York and go back to a traditional setting in Massachusetts where he could work on research and writing. However, he noticed the ad for USF and the regional campuses, particularly the Sarasota campus. He decided to send in an application.

### *How Dr. Barylski felt about the USF area*

When Dr. Barylski came down and had a look at the area and talked to people, he was astonished. He says, frankly, that he had a typical New England attitude, thinking that there is much more to do in New England. However, he was amazed at what was going on in the area. He particularly liked the idea that Florida was growing. He thought the area and the opportunity to grow would be great for a young family. After looking at the town of Sarasota and the particular issues on the campus, he thought it would be wonderful if it all worked out.

*First time Dr. Barylski saw the Sarasota campus in 1979*

He decided to come down early and do his own investigating. Dr. Barylski says the interesting thing about arriving at the Sarasota campus was that it was hard to notice. He saw the New College dorms when he first arrived at the Sarasota campus. Dr. Barylski says the dorms appeared rather run-down and looked like public housing. Then he walked the grounds and looked at the buildings and saw the beautiful bay front area. He thought the area was a very interesting spot. "The physical appearance of the campus was not great. The city of Sarasota was a pretty resort town," he states. Dr. Barylski drove around town, and believed the general setting looked good and tremendously hopeful. He thought there was plenty of work to do to improve things. He was pleasantly surprised.

*Merging of New College and USF and the worries of both institutions*

The Sarasota campus came into existence in 1975 when USF got it as part of an effort to save New College from bankruptcy. Dr. Barylski arrived four years after the merger of New College and USF. He says New College wondered if it was going to disappear into the big university or if its special programs would survive and develop. Dr. Barylski says the New College faculty worried about its future and the survival of programs. At the same time, USF worried about getting enough funding for branch campuses so the campuses could move out of night school mode and have fewer part-time and visiting faculty.

*Dr. Barylski's first tasks as dean and a confrontation with a master plan*

When Dr. Barylski arrived he was confronted with the issues of New College and USF. He received a master plan by the university. The plan's intentions were to show how the university could enlarge its university programs and still have New College on the same campus. Immediately he got involved with the master planning. His first task was to try and digest what the master planners came up with and take it around campus and the surrounding area. He and others decided that they could not go with the master plan, though the university had spent a lot of money on it. Dr. Barylski explained the problems to President Jack Brown. President Brown agreed with Dr. Barylski that the master plan would not meet the needs of New College, the university, or the neighborhood. They believed the master plan would not meet anyone's needs because it was not designed to work properly with the historic district and buildings. President Brown authorized new spending and planning.

*New master plan by USF*

The new plan made provisions for one campus with two programs. It would ensure that New College received what it needed to survive and develop, while the University got what it needed to improve and upgrade its programs. Also, the plan added the promotion of the district. Promotion of the district would be achieved by working with other institutions, such as the Ringling Museum, the Sarasota airport, and theater in order to maintain an educational culture in the historic district at the gateway to Sarasota and Manatee County. Dr. Barylski and others believed the whole area should be beautified and developed. "That became the general strategic policy line for all of our public

speeches and documents, that USF would lead the development of that district. We would focus on New College and the university's academic needs, but we would also be mindful of the special features of that district," states Dr. Barylski. In Sarasota there is a mile of waterfront in the public domain. "The district notion was to pull all of that together so it would really only be one campus. One setting that everyone could enjoy," he says.

#### *Challenges and tensions of having two programs on one campus*

Dr. Barylski says it was easier to come up with the master plan than to get the two groups working harmoniously. The idea was to have one administration serving both groups. Dr. Barylski says this was not difficult. He says it was difficult to get New College to feel comfortable about being a part of USF. He says New College did not change its speech or writing habits. There was a time when USF was interested in letterheads. He says there was fine resistance by New College to include USF in its letterheads. Also, new seals were being created on campus. A new seal was carved up for USF Sarasota. USF Sarasota thought New College should have a new seal as well. He says there was resistance by New College concerning the new seal, which included the words New College and USF written in Latin. Dr. Barylski's job was to keep the two institutions together and to pass things that would benefit both.

#### *Programs built to get the two communities to work together*

"We didn't concentrate on trying to take the identity away from New College students and have them spend more time on the university side or vice versa. The college was extremely concerned about maintaining a liberal arts atmosphere. The college had no interest in mixers of any kind. The main thing we needed to do was to make sure the university and the college students and faculty had the support they needed to be successful," states Dr. Barylski. He says both institutions were working as different groups. Dr. Barylski says the one thing he could not crack was the attitude of the college about wanting to be free and independent from USF. "The march down the road for funding was hard," he states. Dr. Barylski says there was always a bigger funding team assembled by New College if the funding would benefit the college side more. He says when it came time to push for more university funding the college team would not be as prevalent. "We could get a bigger team for something that would be used in common, such as the library. We didn't do the things that one side needed more than the other. We did things that both would benefit from," he says.

#### *Uniqueness and ideas of New College*

Dr. Barylski says there is a big difference between USF and New College in their approaches to academic programs. New College is a product of the 1960s and has individualized degree planning and contract learning. The college made a commitment to develop a degree program, negotiated with the faculty, for each student based on each student's interest. The programs would be carried out through a series of learning contracts. Dr. Barylski says New College's ideas and plans made it more like the traditional liberal arts colleges in the country. New College's commitment to individualized planning meant students did not confront a whole bunch of requirements dictated by a particular college, such as the College of Business. Also, New College had

small classes. New College had a senior honors thesis that students worked on for the entire year. The senior honors thesis moved students closer to master's work. New College encouraged collegiality between students and faculty. Students were welcomed to attend faculty meetings, committee meetings for master planning, and share in the government process and the master plan. Dr. Barylski says New College's whole approach to degree planning was very different from USF's. "New College felt that the essence of a great liberal arts education was so important to preserve and that students and faculty came to the college for this purpose," states Dr. Barylski. He thought New College was more traditional than its public relations liked to point out, especially when seventy-five percent of student work was classroom work. After each class, students received a narrative evaluation as opposed to a grade. "The freedom of curriculum planning and meeting individuals' needs is the great strength of the college. It is important for the state to have the option of attending a liberal arts college," he says.

#### *Why students attended New College*

Dr. Barylski says New College's students were similar to liberal arts college students all over the country. People were coming for various reasons. He says that those who knew about the college's program were coming because they wanted the innovative program and to be more self-directed. He says they wanted to go where they could define the courses they would take and where they had freedom to write independent study contracts and do a senior thesis. He says another percentage was attracted to the idea that you could get a great liberal arts college education at a state tuition price. Also, some came because they could get the special attention of the faculty. Dr. Barylski thinks some seventy-seven percent of New College graduates go on to get doctorate degrees because the preparation at New College is perfect for going to the most traditional graduate schools.

#### *Problems incurred by New College*

Dr. Barylski says in his early years New College was declining in numbers. The college felt that its main problem was that people did not know about it despite its national listing. The college did not have the same kind of budget for admission and recruitment as its rival liberal arts colleges had. Dr. Barylski says this was a major problem. He says that New College continues to be under-budgeted in both admission and recruitment. "If New College does not get a chance to go around enough to promote the college, then it does not get the word out," he states. Dr. Barylski says the college had a real lack of funds in comparison to other liberal arts colleges. "USF grew because Florida was growing and it had Tampa Bay as its main constituency. New College wanted the United States to be its constituency," he says. Dr. Barylski says New College's idea was to have fifty percent of its students come from Florida, and the other 50 percent come from the rest of the country. "Slowly the Florida contingency is growing because it is easier to get the word out in Florida. It is a major investment to get the word out in the rest of the country," says Dr. Barylski. He says that to some extent New College is becoming Florida's liberal arts college as opposed to becoming a well-known national or international college.

### *Dr. Barylski's role as dean*

New College had a provost, so Dr. Barylski was not in charge of its academic programs. However, he served as New College's dean in other areas. He was also not in charge of the university's academic programs since each college had its own dean. "I was in a bizarre position. On one hand, I had authority over some things, and on the other hand, I had to use persuasion," he says. He taught at both New College and USF Sarasota in order to better understand what was happening in the classrooms of both institutions.

### *Influence of New College on USF*

"In some ways the New College program has been influential on the university side, and probably vice versa more than we realize," states Dr. Barylski.

### *New College and USF separate and the effects of the separation*

In 2002 legislation was passed to give New College its freedom. It is no longer a part of USF. Dr. Barylski says New College has gone back to remove USF from all of its seals. "The college was worried that in the long run the growth on the university side would continue and overwhelm the liberal arts college. The idea of having one campus for two programs meant eventual loss of identity within the larger university setting," he states. Both institutions are still together on the same campus. Dr. Barylski says that one of New College's problems is to establish an image as a separate independent institution. People interested in promoting this strategy would like to remove the name of USF from everything, such as buildings and police cars. Dr. Barylski says that during the first year of separation there was a problem with New College wanted to remove USF from any of its items. He says signs were changing without discussion. People decided to divide up the budget. Dr. Barylski says the joint administration was being divided up much to the dismay of those who worked in the joint administration. "The fear is that budgets will be moved and money will be spent and the university will be neglected," he says. Dr. Barylski says that on the university side, the campus CEO's have been raised up to higher designation. They are not called campus deans anymore. They are chief operating officers. He says that they are beginning to build the first major facilities dedicated to the university side of the house. It will take ten years to transition things to be totally on the university side.

### *Why did New College want to separate?*

Dr. Barylski says the long-term point of view may have always been an expectation that some day the separation would take place. He says the college is afraid of being overwhelmed as the university side grows. New College was afraid it would be a small operation within a much larger one. He feels this is a valid concern and is the main reason why New College wanted to separate. However, he believes in terms of time that New College jumped the gun early. New College has about 650 students. The number of university students will approach 2,000. He says that there will not be a huge increase in the number of USF Sarasota students in the near future. This is why he feels that New College jumped the gun early when it decided to separate in 2002.

### *Differences between the Sarasota and Tampa campuses*

Dr. Barylski says the classrooms tend to be smaller on the Sarasota campus than the main Tampa campus. Also, faculty tends to spend more time with students on an individual basis.

### *Architecture on Sarasota campus*

Dr. Barylski says the architecture of new buildings on the Sarasota campus resembles the architecture of the historic district. He says that on the one hand, the architecture was good because it created uniformity and made the district happy, but on the other hand, it created a loss of individual artistic design.

### *Dr. Barylski's thoughts on USF and its branch campuses*

"It is great to have a great public university [that is] willing to put its programs off in satellites," he says. Dr. Barylski believes there is always tension between spending money on the main campus and spending money on the satellite. One of his main problems as dean was to get enough assets to put full-time faculty and stronger programs in place at Sarasota. He says there will always be that tension between the main campus and the branch campuses. "The strength is to keep hooked up to the research campus because otherwise your academic standards will be lower on the branch campuses, where there is a tendency to underemphasize research skills and hire part-time faculty. My concern about the branch system is the tendency on the branches to pull away from the strong university research tradition. The notion of having one university that is strong at the center and serving the whole community of Tampa Bay is very attractive," states Dr. Barylski.

### *Was Dr. Barylski's transition from being an administrator to a faculty member hard?*

Dr. Barylski says only one thing has really bothered him since he left his administrative post. It is hard for him to let go of the belief in the master plan for the educational, cultural, and historical district. "I can't shake that. I tell myself everyday that it's not my job anymore. But, I still get upset when I see people not cooperating on the master plan. I believe firmly in it that the whole district needs to thrive together. But, as far as doing academic work, I love it," he says. He says it is wonderful now that he is able to do serious research, which he could not do while he was dean. As dean, he could not write books or scholarly articles or attend scholarly conferences. He says it is hard to let go of the dean role, but not the nitty-gritty, day-to-day stuff he had to deal with as dean.

### *Community support*

Dr. Barylski says the Sarasota community supports the master plan of the educational, cultural, and historical district.

### *Changes since Dr. Barylski left the position of dean*

His complaint is that his successors did not keep the master plan for the district going prominently. He believes this led to USF losing its leadership position in the promotion of the district. Dr. Barylski says the Ringling Museum in Sarasota is now under FSU's direction because USF did not say that it was committed to promoting the district.

*Where does Dr. Barylski see USF Sarasota in the future?*

He says that in the next decade the Sarasota campus will build a center for the university side that will be beautiful and functional and will be part of the educational, historical, and cultural district. “Now, you can’t really find the University’s presence. It doesn’t stick out,” he says. He hopes the new university center on the Sarasota campus will establish USF’s presence even more on the campus. He says that in the next decade USF Sarasota will continue sharing the classrooms and the library with New College. He says beyond a decade, USF Sarasota will have to plan for growth in the whole region and set aside acreage for the campus.

*Any last words that Dr. Barylski would like to leave behind*

Dr. Barylski says that when he came down for his interviews it was obvious that there were some marvelous things occurring, but people were having trouble seeing that they would be successful. “We encouraged them to feel more strongly and more confident,” he says. Dr. Barylski says that New College saw that it could survive within USF. Also, the whole district saw that it could cooperate together and be beautiful, and that the University would be the factor in promoting this. He says that the district is his legacy, as are the beginnings of the beautification and building process and the enhancing of institutions. He thanks the University for giving him a chance to do that. He is also thankful for being able to do his writing, teaching, and research now, which enables him to travel and do research. He loves that. “I’m very happy about being a scholar,” he says.

*End of Interview*