

6-11-2004

## Joseph Busta oral history interview by Andrew Huse, June 11, 2004

Joseph Busta (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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### Scholar Commons Citation

Busta, Joseph (Interviewee) and Huse, Andrew T. (Interviewer), "Joseph Busta oral history interview by Andrew Huse, June 11, 2004" (2004). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 74.

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USF Florida Studies Center  
Oral History Program  
USF 50<sup>th</sup> History Anniversary Project

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Date of Interview: June 11, 2004  
Editor: Danielle E. Riley  
Date of Edit: July 12, 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Huse  
Location of Interview: Tampa  
Campus Library  
Abstractor: Jared G. Toney  
Date of Abstract: June 30, 2004  
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney



TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Mr. Busta came to USF in 1971 as Assistant Director of Student Organizations.*

*Arrival at USF*

When Mr. Busta graduated from Auburn, he began his first job working in student affairs at the University of Tennessee. After spending a couple of years in Knoxville, he was recommended for a position at the University of South Florida.

*First impressions of USF*

Because Mr. Busta had grown up in South Florida, he was “pretty much familiar with the area,” though because the University was not opened until 1960 he had never before been to the USF campus.

*First day on the job*

He recalls that at the time of his arrival at USF, there were fairly regular student protests on campus against the Vietnam War. His first weekend in Tampa, there was a state convention at USF for the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), “Which was a greatly feared student organization across the country.” Since nobody knew yet who he was, Mr. Busta was asked to attend the convention in order to get a sense of what was going on in the controversial organization. “I did, and there wasn’t anything much going on. Everybody was having a good time ... the conversation was certainly political, but it wasn’t belligerent, and it wasn’t militant as was expected. So that was my first day on the job.”

### *Campus protests*

“We had significant demonstrations here in [the 1970s]. A lot of people got arrested. There [were] a number of ... demonstrations to ‘take over the administration building’ or the student center ... there would be a pretty good number of students ... that actually attempted to take over the intersection of 30<sup>th</sup> Street and Fowler Avenue... the police were waiting for them, and a number of people got hurt ... It was pretty ugly and very scary at the time.”

### *Student affairs position*

In his position at USF, Mr. Busta advised international students, veterans, and fraternities in particular. “We were, at that time, just getting hundreds and hundreds of veterans out of Vietnam who were leaving the military and coming back to school ... So that was a big deal in those days.” After serving in that capacity for a couple of years, he became assistant to the university president, Cecil M. Mackey.

### *Challenges of working with veterans*

In addition to having a large population of “older students,” Mr. Busta recalls that there were a number of mental health issues related to veterans returning from the Vietnam War. Additionally, there were also issues of housing and employment among the veterans. Because the “conflict” in Vietnam was never formally declared a war, many of the soldiers were not able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill until benefits were extended at a later time. “At that time there was not much housing in this area ... for most veterans coming back, living in a dorm ... just wasn’t the thing to do.” By and large, Busta recalls, they were “excellent students – very motivated.”

### *Proliferation of student organizations*

Busta remembers a proliferation of radical and often outlandish student groups in the 1970s. He asserts that the student organizations had very few requirements to meet in order to be legitimized by the University. “And then when there starting being issues across American college campuses, universities starting creating rules ... so the process became more contentious than the actual issue ... It was hard for everybody. It was not unlike the rest of what was going on in our society across the country, and no one really knew where we were going.” In such an environment, Busta was “forced to deal with all the sociological issues” that went along with student affairs on a university campus, “not knowing what the solutions were or where it would end up.”

### *Drug use on campus*

Drugs, he recalls, were not such an issue on campus as they were off campus at the time. “There was a lot of drug education that went on in hopes of preventing significant health problems and issues.”

### *Advisor to the president*

Aside from more formal ceremonial occasions, Mr. Busta had not had the opportunity to meet with President Mackey before he interviewed and began working for him. “Cecil Mackey was an outstanding administrator ... probably the most visionary of the [four] presidents [that] I worked under. I think a lot of what is at South Florida now began with

the kind of vision that he had at the time. Boy, sometimes I disagreed with him terribly, but he had that ability ... for you to disagree and still be on the team.”

Busta believes that Mackey also raised the standards for tenure and the recruitment of faculty and staff at the University. He was also instrumental in shifting the University’s emphasis towards research.

#### *Regional campuses*

Mackey’s most significant accomplishment, Busta believes, was the acquisition and organization of the regional campuses at USF. “We at South Florida had to fight Florida and Florida State for everything ... They had to pay attention to us ... That was the way we were able to get political power ... That was the leverage that enabled us to make great gains.”

#### *Issues*

Many of the disputes during the 1970s, Busta believes, were the result of USF leaving its “comfort zone” as it made the transition from a largely undergraduate teaching institution to a more sophisticated research university. Also complicating matters were the selections of new programs and academic organization on the campus. “It was just the right time to do that,” Busta asserts, “because to wait later would have lost the edge and the growth of the institution.”

One of Mr. Busta’s first assignments under President Mackey was the creation of a “Policy and Procedures” manual for the University, as well as the organization of various administrative committees at USF. “[Mackey] was very process oriented, probably of all the presidents.”

#### *“The Great Pie Incident”*

President Mackey met regularly at open forums with USF students at various locations around the campus. During one of the more turbulent times, Busta remembers that a student came up from around the corner of the Education building and smeared Mackey with a pie. “A student came up behind me, I never saw him, and all of a sudden I looked up and a pie was thrown into the President’s face. By the time I looked over my shoulder, the guy was taking off across the courtyard. I gave short chase but he had too much of a lead at that time ... so I turned around and came back. Course the student newspaper was there, the Oracle, and it was all caught on film, and became known as ‘the great pie incident.’”

“Cecil ... took it in good humor ... He understood what it was all about.”

#### *Format changes at WUSF Radio*

Mackey also met a great deal of resistance from students when the format of WUSF was changed from rock and folk to classical music. “My personal opinion is [that] most of management wanted to do that, but didn’t really want to take the heat to make that change, and I think most faculty wanted it ... There was a lot of tension ... between

students and administrators ... and no one really wanted to bite that bullet, and [Mackey] was not afraid. He was a tough guy. He was strong. He believed in it, certainly.”

“The Underground Railroad was a good program. I listened to it, and listened to the classical [music] as well.”

### *Growth*

Under the Mackey administration, Busta recalls, “The school was growing so fast, and it was very difficult to keep up in terms of resources.” Because state appropriations and budgeting was determined by the previous year’s enrollment, there was often not enough money to meet the demands of the growing university. “You were always scrambling to find ways to cover the bases and have enough faculty, to have enough class space ... Higher education was growing rapidly. The competition, because of that growth, for faculty was keen ... So, hiring people was an issue – it was hard ... All in all it was good. It just was difficult and challenging.”

### *Interim President Reece Smith*

“Now Reece will always be known as an interim president, but the impact he had on the institution was as significant as many presidents ... He brought national and international credibility to the office of the president that we never had before ... And Reece ... is just a great man. He had the ability as a negotiator and a person to pull factions together.”

### *New College*

Mr. Busta recalls the respective administrators at both USF and New College “worked out a wonderful articulation agreement among them and their board and the Board of Regents,” although he doubts that the faculty at either campus were “that keen on it.” Many at New College, he remembers, felt threatened by the perceived imposition of a larger university onto a smaller. Mackey, he asserts, was largely the torchbearer for the project, and as a result it lost a great deal of momentum after his departure from South Florida. “As it sat, the sides started pulling apart a little bit, and probably didn’t achieve all that it could have.” Lately, the issues have largely degenerated into politics, “And I’m not close enough to it anymore to know whether it’s working or not.”

### *University Relations*

After serving as Assistant to the President, Mr. Busta worked as Vice President / Director of University Relations at USF. “That was the first attempt,” Busta recalls, “to organize ... advancement – which would be public relations, publications, alumni development, and governmental relations.” In his position there, Mr. Busta worked as a lobbyist for some time, and ended up hiring Betty Castor (future USF president) to work exclusively in the government relations section of the office. The thing he was most involved in during this period, however, was a Board of Regents program called the Path to Excellence. “At that time, what we wound up passing was the most comprehensive higher education reform bill in history. What it did was it gave ... the state university system some freedom to be their own institution.” The effect, Busta asserts, was the elimination of a great deal of unnecessary state level centralization and bureaucracy that often impeded the education process.

### *Matching Challenge program*

In addition to giving institutions more autonomy and control, it originated the very first “matching challenge” program which “emphasized and tried to promote charitable giving to Florida’s public universities ... Maybe if there’s one thing in Florida that’s allowed all universities ... to really shine over the last decade, it has been that matching challenge program ... It has really allowed Florida to be extremely progressive.”

### *Endowed Chair at USF*

As a result of the program, the first endowed chair at USF was from Chester Ferguson and the Lykes family. “Having him agree ... to create ... the Lykes chair in business ... really sent a shock across the state ... it had statewide implications ... and that helped [the] campaign tremendously.” Mr. Busta believes this set an important precedent and made a strong name for the University throughout the local community and the state at large. “It gave us great credibility.”

Not long thereafter, USF received a gift of \$4.2 million from Hugh Culverhouse, a local community leader. The gift, Busta humorously recalls, was negotiated on his very first cell phone while sitting on the side of Interstate 75, somewhere between Ft. Myers and Sarasota, “Which I thought was just pretty funny!”

### *President Borkowski; Campaign USF*

USF President Francis Borkowski, Mr. Busta recalls, “Was probably the best, pure presidential fundraiser that we had ever had, to that point. He was good at it. And we organized the first university campaign – Campaign USF ... That was a \$111 million campaign ... That campaign was the highlight of my time here.” Mr. Busta also served as Executive Director for the USF Foundation from 1979 to 1985.

### *Sun Dome*

“It was so innovative in its design ... [it] came in over budget,” and required certain modifications as construction progressed.

### *Development and Alumni Affairs*

From 1985 to 1990, Mr. Busta served as the Vice President for Development and Alumni Affairs. “We were really pushing at building the Alumni Association, creating different alumni clubs and chapters around the state, [and] getting more people in involved.” During this time, the University began holding Homecoming events on campus. “If you go through the archives, you’ll find some funky floats! They certainly wouldn’t qualify for Gasparilla, but folks had a good time.”

### *Lifsey House*

Mr. Busta’s office was responsible for working with a community group to hold a statewide competition for the design of the presidential residence at USF. “We wanted to have a facility ... to be reflective of [the] institution and what it meant, and not just a house ... The Lifseys ... were obviously the key to making all that happen.”

“I think as an institution, you have to be strong enough and have the vision and the drive to never quit. Whether times or good or times are bad, if you never quit, then great things can come.”

#### *Memorable experiences*

Of his most memorable experiences at USF, Mr. Busta fondly remembers the election of Les Miller as USF’s first black student body president. Later on, with some encouragement from his supporters, Miller became the first black president of the Alumni Association at USF. “That may not seem like such a big deal today, but it was at the time ... It showed the University and especially our alumni that we were inclusive ... right from the beginning there was great diversity in the Alumni Association.”

When the University was trying to move ahead athletically, Busta remembers the recruitment of basketball coach Lee Rose from Purdue University. “We decided if we’re going to go big time, we’re going to go get a big time coach ... And it was a disaster – he never could do it here. I’m not sure he really cared much about doing it, quite frankly ... It turned out to be a short and pretty unhappy marriage.”

#### *Memorable people*

John Lott Brown, Mr. Busta remembers, was a particularly effective consolidator. “I think where Jack was particularly important [was] in trying to recruit really the best faculty and deans that we could. We didn’t have the clout as a young institution ... but we were getting real close to that, and I think Jack’s key thing was taking that and starting to bring people, and have us become a destination point where people want to go.”

Francis and Kay Borkowski, Busta asserts, “Had the ability to lead and motivate people very well ... He was just good at [fundraising]. He wasn’t afraid to go out and meet people ... you couldn’t have asked for a better president ... He was not only good, but he was emotionally committed, and that’s what it takes.”

#### *Departure from USF*

Mr. Busta left the University of South Florida in 1990. “You can’t devote eighteen years of your life and ... forget, especially when they were as pleasant and rewarding as they were for me. I still miss the institution, and try to keep up with it. It’s going great, you guys are doing a wonderful job. Thanks for having me.”

#### *End of Interview*