

9-12-2003

Michael Farley oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, September 12, 2003

Michael A. Farley (Interviewee)

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Farley, Michael A. (Interviewee) and Greenberg, Mark I. (Interviewer), "Michael Farley oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, September 12, 2003" (2003). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 92.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhistinfo_oh/92

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

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Current Position: Coordinator of Greek Life
and Leadership Development
Date of Interview: Sept. 12, 2003
Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date of Edit: Jan. 7, 2004

Interviewer: Mark I. Greenberg
Location of Interview: Tampa
Campus Library
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Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Farley came to USF in 2000 as the coordinator of Greek life and leadership development.

Mr. Farley began his professional life at the University of Florida and the University of Indiana at Bloomington. He had been lucky enough to work on the national level with large affiliate groups and trade associations, including the North American Inter-Fraternity Conference. He was also the chief operating officer of his own fraternity headquarters in Richmond, Virginia.

Mr. Farley began to focus his career around “large environments and specifically large group dynamics.”

In 2000 he decided to leave the headquarters of his fraternity (Sigma Phi Epsilon) in Richmond for a campus. There were four or five positions he was interested in. USF drew his interest because “only this one offered anything unique.” Arizona, Illinois and Kansas had openings but they would be very similar to his experience at UF and Indiana. He discussed the situation at USF with staff and discussed their hope and plans to change the USF environment and “bring Greek life to the next level.”

Educational Background

Mr. Farley received his undergraduate degree in public relations (University of Florida). This is a critical skill for his work. He got a master’s degree at Indiana University in Higher Education Administration. The school had great faculty, mentors and role models. He did not expect to go into fraternity affairs and was more interested in orientation programs for new students on campus. The switch to the fraternity focus was gradual. This came from pretty extensive work in the legal aspects of higher education and the pursuit of administrative policy.

Why focus on these issues?

Most people in his field don’t do it for the money, and they don’t do it because the hours are easy (they sometimes work 80 to 100 hours a week). In almost every case, during their student experience role models and mentors were influential in making them want to

facilitate the same experience for others. Mr. Farley knows that this was very important for himself personally. With the help of mentors, he was allowed to succeed or fail and this was part of the growth process.

What theoretical concepts are important to this work?

Mr. Farley's own personal philosophical ideas center around certain researchers and writers who argue that the most important skill lies in decision-making. If you put options on the table and allow someone to pick what best suits their needs, they will learn from their successes and mistakes. The details, implementation and everything that follows are secondary to the decision-making process. Success doesn't lie in measurable results, but in whether or not a person did their best, had a good position and evaluated themselves well.

Greek life at USF prior to his arrival

Greek life is a microcosm of the university, both in the long and short term. The students are going through a transitional process, especially post-2000 standards because the expectations and talent of students have risen a lot. Therefore USF needs to work harder to try and provide the things that respected universities provide. They've seen that more and more people are applying to USF as a first choice school. In the past USF had been a student's second or third choice. Students may have come to the school because it is their local school, but recently there has been a rise in the number of students who come to USF as their first choice. They have high expectations if this is their first choice. This creates demand, services and opportunities on campus. This has been evident in Greek life, particularly this year in Greek housing. He is impressed with the progress that the Greek system has made in the three years, the leaders have become an impressive group of college age men and women. This has been a great experience to watch.

His hiring and Greek life in 2000

The evaluation and interview was "one of the most invigorating things" that Mr. Farley has ever gone through. He enjoyed the inquisitiveness of the people that interviewed him. They saw his varied background and perceived him as an immediate source of information and referral. In his travels and work experience he has been on 160 college campuses in the past ten years. He was able to converse with students whose experiences were mainly restricted to the Tampa area. They saw his experience as "an opportunity to be helped to the next level." They knew that changes have been coming; the presidents have recently been squarely behind the goal to make the University of South Florida a great institution of higher learning. A lot of schools say that they want to be a great institution but don't take the necessary steps to insure that, USF has taken those steps in the past three years. Growth is "being managed well but happening quickly and the infrastructure on campus was having a very purposeful effect of where things went and how things happened." This was and still is "very well thought out" and "incredibly necessary." Faculty, in many cases, must work hard just to stay ahead of the students and this is a great environment for them to grow in while they are at USF.

Because of his varied background, Mr. Farley had peers around the country that were confused by his decision to work at USF. Some were under the impression that the school was a small regional campus and were surprised by the size of the University.

When he came to campus in 2000, the University's biggest issue was the image that the school projected. What do people know about USF? Early in his time here he wanted to find out what was going well on campus, what was going poorly, and what they needed to focus on. He had a three to five year plan for progress. The first three years have flown by and the three to five year plan is now irrelevant because they now face new problems and new issues. Despite the abandonment of the plan it was very important initially because it provided focus and a destination.

Mr. Farley was very happy with the campus, from his interview to the present day. While most people elsewhere are afraid of change, people at this school are excited about it and are willing to work hard. Mr. Farley couldn't be happier right now with the work and interaction of students and staff.

Office Structure

Mr. Farley works out of the Marshall Center administration as a member of the division of student affairs. He is in a direct advisory role to student organizations. The Marshall Center is an independent entity that encompasses all student activities. Mr. Farley is coordinator of student activities with a specialty in Greek life.

What do students want?

Many students just want opportunity. Opportunity can be "cyclical, and it can also draw out so many levels of interaction, so many levels of involvement and commitment." The opportunity to be either successful or to fail and the opportunity grow and learn is what he focuses on. He wants to provide "a buffet of options" and work with people or organizations to look at that buffet and see where they are and what makes sense for them. This is part of the growth process for organizations and individuals. There are some organizations in Greek life that are forty years old and others that are only two years old. These organizations are at different places in their college experience with different needs and wants. His office needs to prepare to provide services for both and needs to understand where they are.

Percentage of Student Body in Greek life.

The percentage of the population that enters Greek life is rising. Since Greek housing is opening and they put a lot of effort into public image, the numbers of people involved in Greek life has risen. Sororities have gone up twenty percent over the last year and fraternities are up thirty-three to forty percent over last fall. They are happy about this, but need to make sure that they are able to live up to the expectations of the new recruits.

USF is in one of the areas of the country with the highest level of diversity. Students' high expectations and diversity of needs should be understood. There are Hispanic and Latino fraternities and sororities on campus that are more prevalent than they would be in (for instance) the mid-west. They are able to provide a fraternal experience to a segment

of the population that wants it. This makes him very proud and makes USF “cutting edge even, around the state.” There are organizations that started at USF that are now national and this is very rewarding.

Interaction with member of organizations

He has “significant relationship building opportunities with the leaders of the organizations.” They try to have interaction with all members on some level but there are about 1,600 undergraduates involved at the present. He has had a significant amount of contact with 100-150 of these people, but Mr. Farley feels that it is important to let everyone know they are involved in something bigger. They are joining a community of organizations, not just one organization. He and his staff want for members to feel an inter-fraternal bond.

Numbers of fraternities

There are 1,600 undergraduates in thirty-four fraternal organizations.

Process of getting recognition as a Fraternal Organization

The process is part of standard USF policy. Mr. Farley provides university privileges, services and support. If a person wishes to be recognized, they must come in, tell him who they are and who their members are. The members must be USF students in good standing and they must make academic progress. People must remember that the academics come first and a person will not be allowed to be president of multiple organizations if they do not do well academically. Recognition process is a means of making sure that the “organizations are healthy.” Conducted through the student activities office, the process notes if they have a constitution and an advisor on campus. But fraternal organizations must also go through the national Greek system and Mr. Farley has extensive contact with national fraternities. This is an additional process that Greek organizations must go through in addition to their USF obligations.

Developmental tools and skills taught to leaders

By the time they are presidents of chapters, most people have some leadership skills. These skills must be honed. They don't spend time on time management and delegation or things of that nature because it is assumed that the leaders are able to do these kinds of things. Mr. Farley's office converses about such topics as “values based action.” The organizations are based on rituals of shared values. Leadership teaching at that level is almost philosophical because they don't teach skills per se. Their skills are developed and they come to Mr. Farley's office for more philosophical leadership building and direction.

What do fraternities and sororities want to do?

When faced with these leadership issues, some people will decide to back out immediately, because it is too much for them. Others will automatically realize how much they like these issues and how interested they are in these matters. This is the reason they became involved in Greek life in the first place. “The Greek experience is, to me, the most holistic opportunity, or set of opportunities on campus, because an individual could go out and they could fulfill their athletic needs by joining a team, they

could fulfill their leadership desires by taking a class or joining student government, they could do so many things on campus to fulfill individual needs.” “Nothing on campus takes all of those, plus the housing environment, plus the ritual...and the values based behavior and action and puts them all in place and allows a group of dynamic eighteen to twenty-three year olds to struggle with that together and to solve their problems and to grow with people. There is nothing else on campus that can, in my mind, compete with that totality.”

Greek housing on campus

The opening of Greek housing (four weeks prior to interview) has helped take everything to another level. In 2000 there were a few fraternities and sororities with off campus housing or rented apartments off campus for communal meeting space. There was no Greek housing on campus. It is amazing that there it has taken so little time for the University to reach 41,000 students. This creates a situation where organizations on campus are only twenty-five to thirty years old and their counterparts around the state and the country can be 120 years old. This makes a difficult situation because in other schools they can live together and recruit. There is a certain amount of competition with other campuses, which some advantages are held by the older organizations. In many ways the Greek system at USF was stronger because they had to put forth extra effort to get together and there was a need to plan better and become better organized.

The Greek Village has fourteen buildings with separate fraternities or sororities. They called it Greek Village because it is meant to be very communal and interactive. The front doors are facing a central courtyard and there are no cars allowed on the outside. So when a person leaves their home, they are faced with the entrances and exits of other organizations and their homes. They try to give it a very residential feel with a communal environment. Many of these students are living on campus for the first time, which is odd compared with other schools. Juniors and seniors with no residence hall experience are learning how to share space for the first time, providing an opportunity to really learn and grow.

Who built Greek Village?

Greek organizations have built relationships with university staff, particularly Dr. Harold Nixon, Vice-President of Student Affairs and his staff. The division of student affairs includes Dr. Henry, Guy Conway the Director of the Marshall Center, Tom Kane, Director of Resident's Life and Roy Woodward, the Director of Student Activities.

Money is an issue because when the organization is young they don't have an alumni base to leave significant donations and estates to leave and organizations don't have property to use for a loan. The University "stepped up" with a new and different idea to build Greek housing and Mr. Farley can only think of two other places in the country that built such a significant amount all at once. Usually campuses will either build housing units one at a time or refurbish old buildings, but there is very rarely an operation of this size and scope. Mr. Farley is proud of this. Dr. Kane and Guy Conway really led the effort to organize this relationship with alumni and organizations.

They decided to build organizational homes with long-term leases. Dr. Kane and Dr. Nixon had planned already to add bed spaces to the campus and decided to build organizational housing, adding to campus life and culture in a new and different way. This all developed at once and the decision was made to push this through the final Board of Regents meeting before the BOR became the Board of Trustees. It passed that meeting and ever since the plan has been for the University to build homes and the alumni to sign long term leases, so they can feel as if they are building a home and not just renting a space.

Do other universities build Greek housing to meet dormitory needs?

To Mr. Farley's knowledge the University of San Diego, Middle Tennessee State and the University of South Carolina are the only other schools that have put forth the effort to aid in the building of Greek housing at this level. The unprecedented nature of the action has resulted in Mr. Farley's office getting calls inquiring as to how they were able to go from the conversational level to the action level with the University.

Housing's change to Greek life

The fall semester includes recruitment of fraternities and sororities. On campuses with Greek housing you go from home to home meeting many people. Prior to having the on-campus housing, recruitment was done in meeting rooms in the Marshall Center. There is a different level of interaction and group feeling. Even the groups that don't have a house over at the Greek Village are still able to do their recruiting over there.

The energy level for the fall of this year is different from other years. The students coming in can have their expectations met at the same level of other institutions and they are attracted to Greek life and activities. The energy level this year has been very high.

There was a tragedy early on after the move-in. There was a popular young man in one of the large fraternities who was killed in a plane crash. This was very emotional for everyone and there was an outpouring of support. This was within ten days of moving into the on-campus housing and there was now a physical place that people can visit and congregate and grieve. Prior to living on campus you would not have been able to have other organizations come and support the fraternity that lost a brother. There was a candlelight vigil outside the home and 500 people showed up from the entire Greek Village. This would not have been possible before there was a Greek Village and a real Greek community.

How many students there?

There are 344 bed spaces available in the fourteen properties. Six of them are twenty-bed and two-stories and eight of them are twenty-eight-bed and three-stories. There is a mix of age groups, they are not juniors or seniors exclusively. There are openings where even a few freshman are able to move into an open bed. Almost every one is a sophomore, junior or a senior.

How did they pick who got housing?

There was no favoritism in the selection process. It is important to understand that they don't look at those fourteen houses as the totality of Greek life at USF. They have a very diverse organizational base which are as important as the others with houses. They wanted to create a community that welcomed everyone, whether you live there or not. They did not want to create tiers of Greek life and preferences.

The University had given land to about twelve organizations that wanted to build. The plan was unsuccessful but these twelve organizations had paid \$25,000 for the right to build. These twelve that tried and failed to build were grandfathered into the process of the new Greek life. They had paid \$25,000 and deserved the chance to get a return from that investment. The money was used to construct the street and bring in electricity and water and sewage so these organizations were in because of their previous investment. Of the original twelve there were a few that either didn't exist or were unwilling to participate in the process, so there were ten groups grandfathered in and four spaces open when all was said and done. There was an application and presentation process. A committee of faculty, staff students and alumni listened to the presentations of nine or ten groups and from that pool the last four were chosen. They then made the \$25,000 commitment. This would make sure that all groups paid the same amount of money toward the construction. Landscaping, the entrance to the village and the driveway were supported by this money.

The original \$25,000 group

The original cul-de-sac designated for Greek housing that the first twelve groups paid for is not in the same location of the current Greek Village. The original cul-de-sac was near the Sun Dome and that area is now designated for the ongoing athletic growth. The Village is now on the corner of Maple and Holly across from the University Police and Golf Course.

What are the contributions of fraternities and sororities since 2000?

In addition to each chapter's community service initiative they have inter-fraternal functions such as Greek Week, and a spring homecoming. This is a charity and talent event that has donated money to many varied causes. In this week there will be 5,000-6,000 hours of service with a typical donation in the range of \$25,000. Between Greek Week and each chapter's philanthropic endeavors they do about 10,000 hours in service with about \$50,000 to \$60,000 in donations a year.

There are 350 organizations recognized by Student Activities and there are outlets for leadership and volunteer work. There are so many opportunities for people to find a program and outlet for their desire to give something back.

Leadership Development

There is a leadership studies minor and certificate program that Mr. Farley teaches. This is also different than at most other universities; there are probably only eight or nine similar programs around the country. This provides leadership skills in an academic setting and the certificate or minor actually shows on transcripts.

Work with non-Greek leaders

He does come into contact with other leaders, especially those who lead in residence halls. The residence hall leaders are a great source of leadership and great campus leaders can come from it, either through hall government or RA positions. There are volunteer positions in student activities and this “cultivates these great classes” that someone can take. Mr. Farley teaches “Readings in Leadership.” Groups of people take these classes for their own personal development and the development of their leadership skills.

Seminars or Classes offered

Through the year they have classes that are orientated towards “skill building and development for organizational leaders.” This is designed for officers of different organizations. They have about two chances a semester for these people to get together. They also have programs that provide personal skill building. These can make a person better and this spread to wherever that person goes. They try to find a balance between the organizational and the personal development of student leaders.

What’s next?

There is a plan for “Phase 2” of Greek Village. “Phase 1” is the developed section and another six housing units are designed for Phase 2. This will be on the same plot of land and they will look the same as the other houses, so it is really an addition. Mr. Farley would like to be able to start that in the future, hopefully in about two years. He is also excited by “Phase 3,” which is a more long-range plan. They have met a need that the campus community has and the third phase will encompass a smaller environment. This phase will support the smaller organizations, particularly the multi-cultural organizations, which might only have twelve to twenty members. These groups do not need a whole house, but could get a smaller unit that might just sleep a few people and provide a place to meet their needs. This will set USF even farther ahead of the curve when it comes to Greek housing. He is very proud of where they are and is excited about where they are going

The greatest challenge he has faced

The tragedy of the plane crash earlier in the year was difficult. This is a very large community, larger than many towns and it is impossible to escape the possibility that someone will die. There has been at least one death a year in the Greek community since he has been here. That might not be the hardest thing they go through because it is part of life and taking the people you care about through the grieving process is healthy. People within the Greek system refer to one another as “brother” and “sister,” a representation of the familial bond that they share; that they feel collective grief is natural and healthy. These things are difficult, but we move on and grow, and the group and the individuals are better because they face the difficulty together.

The most difficult things are people who did not connect with the desire to be a better Greek system and don’t have higher expectations. Some people think that they did not sign up for the work involved in building a strong Greek system. People that look for the

stereotypical Greek experience are disappointed because that is not what the Greek system at USF is trying to do. Mr. Farley is saddened because he is doing the right thing and some people are not on board.

Most rewarding experience

The opening of Greek Village has provided a lot of energy for them. It has been great for the presence of Greek life as an opportunity on campus. Being part of the energy of the opening cannot be recreated for him.

Also, national fraternities and sororities hire graduating seniors every year to travel the country as consultants. This is a great honor and these are the best students available. When he was at UF as a Greek advisor he judged his leadership success by the number of people hired to fill these positions. USF had never had anyone travel for national organizations. This is mostly because this is a young campus with a small Greek system. Last year they had three hires from the University, which is less than he was used to at UF, but these people are out telling the story of USF Greeks and this makes Mr. Farley very happy and proud.

End of Interview