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Kathleen de la Pena McCook oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, March 20, 2003

Kathleen de la Peña McCook (Interviewee)

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

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

She came to USF July 1, 1993 as a director and professor in the school of Library and Information Science.

Circumstances that brought Dr. McCook to USF

In 1993 she had completed ten years at Louisiana State University as dean of the school's Library and Information Science Department and as dean of the graduate department. "I found that my elevation to dean of the graduate program did not make me very happy and I missed being in my discipline," Dr. McCook states. So she decided to look at administrative positions in the area of library and information science. The position at USF was open. In describing USF's school of Library and Information Science, she says, "The school needed a lot of work, it had been slated for closure, and then saved. A list of recommendations had been given to the College of Arts and Sciences that needed to be achieved before the school could be saved," Dr. McCook says. She was one of the recommendations. USF needed to hire someone with national recognition.

Reasons USF appealed to Dr. McCook

"The reason USF appealed to me was because, at the time, it had a program in both Miami in Broward County and in Tampa. The opportunity to work with a very diverse group of people and to build a program that had reached a plateau were both very interesting challenges," Dr. McCook says.

First time she saw the USF campus

"After I finished my interview I felt quite unsure because the campus was so stark. Not much beauty around the campus in the early 1990s. It was out in the middle of a suburban sprawl and at first glance there was not much community around. My initial reaction was grim," she says.

How was the library school organized in 1993?

"It had been in the College of Education, then moved to the College of Arts and Sciences, and then it was slated to close. But there was a statewide defense of the program. When the College of Arts and Sciences decided to take it, the school was temporarily put in the

College of Mass Communications until someone could be brought in to get it back on a semi-autonomous footing,” she states. There were seven faculty members including Dr. McCook. “It was not in very good shape. The student demand was very large, so all that needed to be done was to put the school in conformity with the demands,” she says.

Why such a student demand for the Library school in 1993?

Dr. McCook states that there were only two Library and Information Science schools in the state, at FSU and USF. So the limited number of schools created the large demand.

When Dr. McCook arrives, what had to be done for the school

When she arrived at USF in 1993, she had a great charge and mission to get the program up and running and to work all over south Florida. She was very excited. The school had not had a full time permanent administrator for a couple of years. Dr. McCook says a lot of things had to be done. One of the things was a Board of Regents’ report had to be completed. The report was due August 1. So in her first month at USF, she had to plan the whole vision of the school and plan a site visit of external visitors.

Dr. McCook says FSU began to be anxious about her arrival at USF

According to Dr. McCook, FSU became very anxious when she arrived. FSU went to the Board of Regents and asked that USF’s library school not be allowed to teach in south Florida because it was outside of the mission area. Dr. McCook says at that time, the state universities were struggling with each other. If any program appeared to be challenging FSU’s program, the school would go after that program.

FSU versus USF’s library program

Dr. McCook says, “FSU went after USF’s program.” She says the Board of Regents was persuaded by the people at FSU to stop the program from teaching classes in south Florida.

Dr. McCook is informed that the program in south Florida will end

Dr. McCook was informed about the decision on a day when she had a team coming in from all over the country to look the program over. She received a phone call from the provost at the time, Dr. Meisels. He told her that USF was closing the program in south Florida. According to Dr. McCook, she was very upset, and Dr. Meisels told her to “get a grip” and then hung up.

Her reaction to the news of the program in south Florida ending

She says the announcement was completely out of the blue and it served to do two things. She got upset and then she got angry. She says, “We were told to photo copy the transcripts of the students taking courses in south Florida and then send them to FSU.” Dr. McCook did not do that. She knew she could deliver a better program. She knew that USF was more committed to diversity and she knew that students wanted the program to stay. According to Dr. McCook, FSU wanted to end the program simply to contain USF in the Tampa region. She says FSU had not had a major presence in south Florida. Dr. McCook says after being here only three months she went around to meet alumni and people all over the state to get them to help defend her program. Dr. McCook

says she received a lot of help. According to Dr. McCook, students refused to send transcripts to FSU.

The decision to end the library program is overturned

Ultimately Betty Castor, who worked for the legislature, came in and overturned the decision. Dr. McCook was allowed to proceed.

Dr. McCook describes the year of tension

“It was a very painful year, since USF administrators at the provost level had not been willing to understand what was going on. But, I knew what the students wanted and I worked hard to get it.”

A new dean of Arts and Sciences helps the situation

At that point, provost Stamps became the dean of Arts and Sciences. “He was very supportive and worked very hard to repair the damage that had been done in the year of hiatus in south Florida,” she says.

The events get written about and talked about

According to Dr. McCook, in 1994, a *Weekly Planet* article was written about the events. “My small program became a symbol of what would happen statewide if other programs moved along,” she says.

Distance education changes things

“Once distance education began all bets were off everywhere. Today we see UF and FSU giving MBA courses in Pinellas County. Each school is doing the best they can to produce the kind of courses that students want to take. Looking back, the difficulties that FSU gave my program were needless,” Dr. McCook states.

Dr. McCook learned a valuable lesson from the whole experience with FSU

She says that from the experience, she learned a valuable lesson. She says that, “As a faculty administrator, you need to always think about what the students need; and if you think about what they need you will do the right thing. The students wanted and needed the program, and that’s what guided me to preserve the program. But it was a rough and tumble introduction to Florida politics at the Board of Regents level.”

Dr. McCook comments about then provost Dr. Meisels’ actions during the conflict (Library classes in south Florida)

Commenting on Dr. Meisels actions during the conflict, Dr. McCook states, “A great miscalculation on then provost Dr. Meisels. He exhibited an unbelievable lack of understanding and support for a faculty member who had come in goodwill. I have never understood how an administrator can become that disconnected with the programs they oversee.”

What was Dr. McCook’s vision for the school of Library and Information Science and how was it different from previous administrations?

Dr. McCook says one of the areas in which she brings special expertise to the school of Library and Information Science is an understanding of needing a diverse Library and Information Science graduate pool. She says that library science is a very homogenous field, primarily Anglo. Dr. McCook says when she first arrived the very small numbers of Latinos, blacks, Asians, and Native Americans needed to expand if they were going to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. “Although the school had always been welcoming students of color, it hadn’t been proactive in reaching out to them,” she says. Upon arriving at USF, Dr. McCook realized it was not going to be possible to get the huge amount of resources that were needed in order to get the school on a rapid high technology pace. She says the school was going to receive some resources but not enough to be a superstar. In order to carve out a niche for the school of Library and Information Science, Dr. McCook decided to go in the direction of reaching out to students of color.

Dr. McCook comments on wanting the school of Library and Information Science to reach out to minority students

“We reached out primarily to African Americans and Latinos. Reaching a point in my tenure as director when we were one of the top ten supporters of programs to graduate students of color in the country,” says Dr. McCook. She says the school reached out to Latinos because of the demographic makeup of the Tampa Bay area, which includes many Hispanics. “We had a National Institute for Migrant Workers Library Outreach with a federal grant. We then had a national conference on Library Services to Youth of Hispanic Heritage. In 2000, the school was awarded the very first recognition award by the National Association for Library Services for the Spanish Speaking because of our efforts to work hard in this area. We gave courses on Spanish speaking services for non-Spanish students. We have really tried to recruit and retain Spanish students. At the same time we have developed our program in information and technology ways. Attempting to recruit and serve people of color has been a special focus,” Dr. McCook says.

Where was the school located in 1993?

Dr. McCook says she was very fortunate because the school had just moved into the new Communications and Information Sciences building. The school moved from the Health and Human Services building, which, according to Dr. McCook, was not a very nice setup. She got to walk into a brand new setup.

Dr. McCook and the school of Library and Information Science begin teaching Internet courses

She says the CIS building had set up a lot of photography and video labs. The library school had to convert those right away to computer rooms because that was the direction in which the field was moving. Dr. McCook says the Internet was just beginning in the early 1990s. The Library and Information Science school decided to establish a campus wide undergraduate Internet course. Dr. McCook recognized that the Internet would be something the undergraduate students would need to know about. The school established classes to teach the students. “And immediately the undergraduate program, which had not existed prior to that, greatly burgeoned. Now we have a large undergraduate

concentration all emanating from the creation of the Internet as a topic of study. We now have three instructors who teach undergraduates; none when I came,” Dr. McCook says.

How has the school grown in the past ten years?

Dr. McCook says the school has always been a large program. Since there are only two Library and Information Science programs in the Florida, USF has centers throughout the state. There is a satellite program in Broward County. Also, there is an office in the Broward County public library where classes are given and a part time advisor is present. The USF library school has added other sites to the program, including Orlando, UF Pasco County, Brevard County, Polk County, Palm Beach, Miami, Ocala, and Sarasota. Dr. McCook states, “We have classes Saturday, every other week, or double weekends depending on what the need is. The program has outposts all over the state. We are the largest master’s level program in the College of Arts and Sciences.” The USF library program had a contract with the Miami-Dade school system to educate seventy librarians. USF was there for three years and graduated the seventy school librarians. “The program continues to grow and continues to reach out and find new audiences. We graduate about 150 a year. It was half that when I first came, and the faculty is fifteen now,” she says. In 1993, there were seven faculty members.

Diversity of the faculty at the Library and Information Science school

Dr. McCook says there are both men and women, but more women. The faculty includes blacks, Latinos, and Asians. “We have all types of people in the program. Not as many of each group as we would like. Sometimes with adjuncts we get more diversity,” she says.

How have courses offered changed in the last ten years in the program?

“By 1993, most LIS programs had a large number of courses. The big push really happened in the field in the late 1970s. Naturally, we had to respond to the digital technology and add courses like Digitization, Library Materials, or Knowledge Management. But, actually these were courses already on the books in addition to some expansion in relation to the Internet. But the full scopes of classes were already there. They haven’t changed much in ten years,” she says.

How has the upper administration supported the school of Library and Information Science?

“Betty Castor is our hero. She said this isn’t right, do what you need to do. It was like the sun coming out after weeks of rain. Even though it had been difficult to move, I was ready to consider moving again,” Dr. McCook states. She does not think she would have stayed if Betty Castor had not reversed the decision in regards to the library program in south Florida. Dr. McCook says she did not need the position. She wanted a challenge, but another position was not a problem. “So I stayed and fought. It was hard to move into a new position and already be at odds. I knew the people were wrong, and I knew they would be proven wrong, and I would be able to do the right thing. And that happened,” Dr. McCook says. She says she had the great privilege to work under provost Stamps, who was then dean Stamps. Dr. McCook states, “He was an outstanding dean for the College of Arts and Sciences. He focused on things that interested me, like

building community and community engagement. He provided a lot of direction for our program.” Since that time, Dr. McCook says she has been disappointed with what she believes are threats to academic freedom. “I believe the current Board of Trustees and the heavy-handed way they are making up rules without appropriate consultation of the faculty is extremely dangerous,” she states.

How USF differed from other institutions where Dr. McCook previously worked

USF was the very first institution that she worked at which was not a primary Research I institution. Before coming to USF, Dr. McCook worked at the University of Illinois, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin, and Louisiana State University. USF is also the first institution she worked at that is not a land grant institution. Also, according to Dr. McCook, USF has so much paperwork that pulls one away from the real work at hand. She says other universities must have found a way around it. Dr. McCook says the library was not as well developed.

The changing of upper administration since Dr. McCook has been at USF

In regards to when she first arrived, Dr. McCook says, “There was not as much understanding of the big picture. Under Betty Castor we grew a lot. I was very happy with USF at the end of the Castor reign. She beautified the campus. Community engagement started with her. The medical school grew. It was a positive time in the ‘90s. Since the change of administration things have dissolved. We are in a shaky time right now. Whether we can get through the time, the faculty members will really have to work hard to resist repression and to keep us on the course that Castor set for us in the ‘90s.”

How has she helped to foster one of her passions—reaching out to the community?

She wrote a book about a number of case studies that she did around the country. One of the case studies was about the Tampa public library. She tries to work with students and classes to have people that work in the library become full participants in the community and not just reactive responders. She tries to have librarians involved in the community in groups and agencies as board members and planners. She encourages librarians, the faculty, and the school of Library and Information Science to become full participants in community life. “We look to be internationally famous, but engagement within the community is as important as national or international fame. She edited a column on the topic of community building. Dr. McCook has given a lot of speeches around the country about community engagement. She has also been on television speaking about the issue.

What were the motivations of students coming to study library and information science now and in 1993?

Dr. McCook says students’ motivations to come and study in the library school have not changed in the last ten years. She says people come to the school of Library and Information Science because they love books and preserving knowledge and they want to make sure knowledge continues to be preserved. Dr. McCook says students are disappointed when they are told that they have to work with computers. In regards to students working with computers, Dr. McCook says, “We try to add to their passion and

not take it away.” “Libraries are one of the oldest professions. So our students have an idea about what librarianship is. We try to change it and make it exciting and say it’s full of computers. They don’t come to us to work with computers, but because of the idea of preserving knowledge over time,” she says.

The issue of food in the library—how has it changed, is it a common topic?

“We talk about it all the time. I read a book that talks about what should the library be all about now. Once Barnes and Noble popped up and allowed people to drink coffee and read, people were thinking so what’s the big deal,” she states. Dr. McCook says many of her students have gone on to manage libraries that have cafes, and it is a topic they discuss. She says they do not want to have to deal with the cleanup. “But I would say pay a crew to come in and clean up and make your patrons happy,” she states.

Is there an emphasis on working with other departments at USF?

She says faculties are encouraged to interact with other departments. Dr. McCook has had a lot of opportunities around USF to interact with other departments. She regularly works with faculty all over the campus on different projects. The library school teaches courses in the College of Mass Communications. The school library faculty works with the department of Fine Arts, and the College of Education.

What does the library school teach students about patrons, has it changed?

“We try to teach our students to think about user behavior. There are different needs for undergraduates versus graduate students. Over the last decade the profession has become more responsive to people’s needs and people’s disabilities, like hearing or mobility. We also think about people coming from different cultures and are conscious of new immigrants or new Americans that come,” she states.

Librarians are usually women, has that changed at USF?

According to Dr. McCook, the majority of students are female. Regarding females in administrative positions she says, “Until the women’s movement of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, the administrators were all male. Now today women are as free as men to take administrative jobs.” She says the numbers of male versus female have held steady with thirty percent male and seventy percent female. She says at an academic school the numbers might be sixty percent female and forty percent male. At a school library it might be ten percent male because, she says, men are not as attracted to working with children. At USF, she does not think it is changing a lot. Dr. McCook says that computers may have attracted more men.

The changes in Dr. McCook’s administrative duties

She was an administrator at USF for six years. She says the contract was for five years. “I could have gone on, but I felt like our school needed to go another level. We are in very good shape administratively, but resources were not as good. We were getting good a strong faculty, but not a strong research faculty. I thought my next contribution should be to go back to the teaching and writing faculty. The last three years I produced a much healthier amount of books. And last fall I was designated Distinguished University Professor. So it seems like I made the right decision,” Dr. McCook states.

In the next decade where does Dr. McCook think USF will be?

She thinks that Florida is at the rock bottom of the fifty states in support of higher education. “We could be a major school with a small fund,” states Dr. McCook. She is trying to find political candidates who support higher education and elect them.

Hot topics being taught in the school of Library and Information Science

Dr. McCook says some topics of focus are the new technologies like digital libraries and the different things you can do to protect artifacts. She says since September 11 the biggest topic in her field is civil liberties. Dr. McCook says librarians are required to pass over a patron’s record if the FBI comes and that they are not allowed to tell what happened. “We are fighting to repeal the Patriot’s Act. The Children’s Internet Protection Act says that for libraries to receive state funds they have to have filtering. The expansion of knowledge is being contracted by people who are trying to be repressive. People have gone from focusing on new technology to how to censor. Censorship is the biggest thing in our field right now. And trying to save the State Library of Florida from closing,” Dr. McCook states.

Any lasting statement that Dr. McCook would like to leave behind at USF

The legacy that Dr. McCook would like to leave behind is, “To educate a group of students who are dedicated to preserving civil liberties and making it possible for the people in the community to have access to the information they need for their daily lives, their health, and their happiness. A group of people who are so dedicated to these ideals that they would go to jail rather than expose a person’s confidentiality. And ensure that all library resources are available to all people.”

End of Interview