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Gerhard Meisels oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, March 25, 2003

Gerry G. Meisels (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Meisels came to USF in 1988 as provost for USF. He is currently a professor of chemistry and the director for the Coalition of Science Literacy.

Arrival and circumstances that brought him here

USF was advertising nationally for a provost. He interviewed and was hired. Before this he was the dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

Description of USF (Landscape)

Dr. Meisels stated, "It didn't look much like a university, fairly barren, landscaping was poor or non-existent. It didn't really feel like a university, it felt more like a public institution of some kind." Dr. Meisels stated that he could see the promise because there was a lot of vacant land that could be built on. He went on to describe his first encounter with USF: "It didn't look very good. It was not a very attractive campus. It's much different today," Dr. Meisels stated. Dr. Meisels says it looks more like a university today.

Description of USF (Buildings)

He said that upon his arrival there was on campus housing that was not in good shape. Some buildings were well designed, while others, according to Dr. Meisels, were "architectural nightmares." Some have been updated since 1988, but Dr. Meisels says that others are still in need of updating.

Responsibilities of a provost

A provost is the chief academic officer and responsible for relationships with the faculty and academic programs. A provost is also an intermediary between teaching resources and public services and the governing bodies, including the president and business officers of the university.

Provost's interactions with other colleges at USF

Dr. Meisels said that there were regular monthly or weekly meetings with deans and directors. The provost was involved in the hiring of all positions in the colleges, except the college of medicine.

Provost's duties that may stand out to Dr. Meisels (Fond memories or bad memories)

His most positive memory was the interactions he had with the faculty and faculty senate, and the general commitment he found in so many people to USF and its future. "It was an unusually good group of people, and I really enjoyed interacting with them," Dr. Meisels stated. He said that on the negative side, the university went through a lot in his last few years as provost. The president was under attack and a lot of the staff meetings were taken up with dealing with those issues. Then there was an interim president. "It was a very difficult time," he said. (He was provost for six years from 1988 to 1994).

Major initiatives at USF regarding teaching, research, and public service

Dr. Meisels stated that when he interviewed in 1988, it was clear that USF wanted to become a research institute. The provost was partly responsible for fostering the idea, while at the same time, not overlooking the students and faculty. USF began to revise tenure and promotion policies to place more emphasis on a balanced judgment. USF began to apply national standards to the research process rather than local standards. Dr. Meisels stated that USF developed a teaching and learning center to maintain the importance of teaching quality and the interaction with students. "There were lots of battles in those days about the issues of students affairs and balancing between research and teaching," Dr. Meisels stated.

Faculty's thoughts on research vs. teaching, etc.

Dr. Meisels said that the students did not bring up the issues of teaching and research, but rather the issues were internal and brought up by the faculty. According to Dr. Meisels, the faculty had many different points of views. Dr. Meisels that for the first couple years from 1988-1990, USF developed a long range plan that would last for ten years. David Stamps, the current provost, was one of the committee chairs during the planning process.

Implementation of the research plan

Problems occurred when the planning process was close to conclusion. At that time, Florida went through budgetary problems and $\frac{1}{4}$ of the budget was lost on a per student basis for two to three years. "This hindered any further development at that time," Dr. Meisels stated.

USF as a Research I institution

Dr. Meisels believes that USF is stabilizing as a Research I institution. However, Dr. Meisels added that although USF is numerically a Research I institution, in institutional character USF is not. "We have a ways to go," Dr. Meisels stated. He says that USF is a Research I institution primarily because the university has a medical school. Medical schools attract a lot of money, which increases the numbers figures, which is the basis for which one determines if a university is a Research I institution. Dr. Meisels stated that USF has some strong areas in research, but on the broad basis, USF is not yet a Research

I institution. Dr. Meisels states that the university could not be a Research I institute without strong sciences. He believes that the area of chemistry was strong about 20 years ago, but it has faded since then. He said it was not until about five years ago that USF made a decision to place more importance on chemistry.

Description of USF President Borkowski (President from 1988-1993)

Frank Borkowski was the president when Dr. Meisels arrived at USF. Dr. Meisels stated that he had a lot of contact with the president. According to Dr. Meisels the president was strongly externally oriented and motivated to build relationships with the community. He was committed to the arts. Both he and his wife were musicians.

The turmoil during the presidency of Borkowski (The effects on Dr. Meisels as provost)

Around 1992, there was a problem with a basketball player who had been accused of raping a girl. He was the best starter, and the president was very ambitious to have a successful basketball team. The sports endeavor was supervised by the vice president of student affairs—who also wanted a winning team. According to Dr. Meisels, the vice president misled the president. The president committed himself to a course of action in defense of the player. According to Dr. Meisels, this player was indefensible. “This lasted about two years, things were really bad,” he says. “There were stories in the press. A lot of the staff meetings were taken up by the president seeking advice on how to proceed,” he says. Dr. Meisels says that this turmoil stopped the progress of many USF initiatives since the president was consumed by the ordeal. According to Dr. Meisels, it became obvious that the president should find another job, which he did in 1993.

Working with President Borkowski

Provost is a member of the president’s council. The president’s staff meets at least weekly. Dr. Meisels stated that the president left the academic affairs to the provost. Dr. Meisels was primarily the one who worked with the faculty, faculty senate, academic programs, and other internal things such as planning processes.

Public service of USF

Dr. Meisels states that a university’s reward structure is what drives the university. Things need to be recognized internally in some way. Dr. Meisels states that you cannot pursue all goals at the same time. Goals are different for the different areas of a university. For instance, the Department of English would have difficulty in providing a lot of public service. Providing public service would be a lot easier for the Department of Education because they can interact with the community and school districts. Dr. Meisels states that a university will build reward structures in order to recognize external service. A university has to develop different approaches to such things as public service for the different colleges. “Each college has to define its own mission and priorities,” Dr. Meisels stated. “What would make sense for Arts and Sciences would not make sense for some of the other ones,” said Dr. Meisels. He said that one cannot compare the Philosophy Department to the Biology Department. One has to compare the Philosophy Department to other philosophy departments with a ranking system.

How USF differed from the University of Nebraska or other institutions for which Dr. Meisels worked

Dr. Meisels' professional career has been spent at four kinds of places. His first ten years he worked in industry. Then he went to the University of Houston, which was a young public institution. He said it was much like USF, but about twenty years older. Then he went to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. He said this university was a totally different environment. He says the university has been around for more than a century—130 years. He says the university has long standings of tradition, a strong football team, and an understanding of the balance and importance of teaching, students, faculty, and research. Dr. Meisels said that when he came to USF in 1988 it was a young university. He said the university had to address issues that a lot of universities had already addressed. These issues were such things as the balance between research and teaching. "Most of the older universities have that worked out," Dr. Meisels stated. He says that USF was similar to the University of Houston. The University of Houston was also trying to find the balance between students, teaching, research and funding.

USF's balance between research and teaching

Asked if USF has a long way to go in striking an appropriate balance between research and teaching, Dr. Meisels says yes. "We're still struggling, we have a long way to go," said Dr. Meisels. "I think it will be decades before we have that balance," he stated. In regards to pressure that USF and the faculty may feel from trying to fulfill certain requirements that are needed for a university to be a research one institution—Dr. Meisels stated the pressure is indeed felt. "There's a lot of pressure to publish, bring in money, and get research grants. It's not all bad, but it's a little too far on the side of no recognition for any other activity," he said. He said that at a mature university there is room for people who do a lot of research and those that don't. Dr. Meisels said that there has to be some opportunity for those that are not focusing on research. "They have to be respected, recognized, and rewarded," he said. The people who are on the education side have to cope with the problem of a strong focus of research. In speaking with a colleague one day, Dr. Meisels and him or her discussed the president's distinguished awards ceremony. "Almost all [rewards] went to people with high research visibility not so much to people who had a commitment to teaching," he said. Dr. Meisels says that there are some young people, like in the chemistry department, who are strongly focusing on education. "But even they will have to prove their medal by getting funding for their research on education. It's a lot of pressure," Dr. Meisels said.

Teaching at USF

"Good teaching is a really difficult issue," Dr. Meisels said. He said in the past, only the top ten to fifteen percent of high school graduates went on to college. Dr. Meisels says that the environment has changed, and today it is no longer true. Now 2/3 of all high school graduates attempt post-secondary school in some form. He said that the top ten percent go to universities or colleges to learn, but the majority of the others students go to colleges to get a better job, or to get the degree in order to have life-long employment. In regards to this issue of the majority of students going to college for much different reasons than in the past, Dr. Meisels states that there has to be different approaches to these kinds of students. "The issue is more severe at USF than it would be at Harvard,"

he said. For instance, Harvard still gets the top few percent and those students who have parents or guardians who strongly support education. Therefore, according to Dr. Meisels, these students know more about education and possibly value it more. “That’s not so much true for a public university,” he stated. Dr. Meisels said that if you want to teach well and want students to learn, a professor has to change the way him or her teaches. According to Dr. Meisels, this takes time, commitment, and insight. He says that he has talked to professors who teach classes to non-majors and to those who are aspiring teachers. Dr. Meisels stated that he has asked the professors if they are teaching the things that students will need to know once they are teachers themselves. Dr. Meisels says that he has received a response like, “Gerry, I don’t have the foggiest idea what these people do in the public schools.”” This is basically irresponsible,” Dr. Meisels said. “It’s not going to change until we get past this pure research hurdle,” he said. “So in the long term we have to change, or we will become irrelevant,” stated Dr. Meisels.

Dr. Meisels’ Post-provost time

The president who hired him, Frank Borkowski, left the university in 1993. A new president arrived, Betty Castor. According to Dr. Meisels, it was obvious that she wanted to appoint her own people, so he resigned. After resigning, Dr. Meisels became the director of the Coalition of Science Literacy. He says that Betty Castor asked him what he wanted to do upon resigning. Dr. Meisels gave her a couple of options. When Dr. Meisels arrived at USF, he was a tenured professor of chemistry. He and Betty Castor worked out the plans for the coalition, what its charter would be, and what the coalition would do. When he formally resigned, he took on the directorship of the coalition.

Creation of the Coalition of Science Literacy

When he was provost he was chairman of the Council of Scientific Society of Presidents. The council had many meetings that dealt with the issue of science education. He was aware that USF was not doing anything about improving science at the university. In 1992, he commissioned the college of education for a planning process to improve science education. Dr. Meisles says that that did not work; he did not get a plan. Then, upon resigning as provost, he did present Betty Castor with his ideas. The coalition was established.

The mission and accomplishments of the Coalition of Science Literacy

“It’s a group of institutions that work together to try to improve teaching of mathematics and science, and more accurately the learning in mathematics and science in public schools and universities of the Tampa Bay region,” he stated. The coalition has led statewide initiatives. Dr. Meisels also serves as the chair of the statewide Coalition for Improving Mathematics and Science Education for Florida. This coalition has been responsible for changing legislation and providing funds for better training for elementary school teachers, including science and the FCAT. Part of the mission of the coalition is to help the mathematics and science departments at USF. A textbook for the course at USF, *Science That Matters*, was organized by a conference of the coalition in 1995 or 1996. At the conference people got together to think through what should be done in an introductory science course. According to Dr. Meisels, they came up with a new way of teaching.

Funding and location of the coalition

USF funds Dr. Meisels position and the position of an administrative assistant. “I have a very small operating budget,” Dr. Meisels states. The coalition is located in the HMS building, room 456.

Training of math and science teachers (secondary education)

In 2002, Hillsborough County hired fifty people to teach middle school mathematics. Only three of these fifty were certified to teach in that area. He said that by the end of four years, probably half of the fifty will not be there anymore. In Florida, college graduates from the state meet fifteen percent of the need for mathematics and seventeen percent for science. The rest have to come from other states or from a business industry called alternative career people. These are people who come from such places as accounting firms and become teachers.

Problems of public education

Dr. Meisels says that the problems of public education need to be addressed. Such issues are the diversity of students, lack of parental guidance, and classroom discipline.

How and why the coalition tries to help public education

The coalition tries to help teachers learn more about managing a classroom. According to Dr. Meisels, USF is interested in public school science and math education because of the university’s own self-interest. As to why USF is interested in public school science and mathematics courses, Dr. Meisels says, “Most of our students come from this area—that would be my number one answer—answer number two—is that it is the standard obligation of any institution and university to support the rest of the education establishments that surround them.” He said that at USF the College of Education is high on the priority list. But there are staffing problems and the education careers are not all that attractive. A public school teacher does not have the time or energy to develop innovative approaches or changes. The university faculty is in a much better position with a lot more time to develop approaches and to stay current.

Feelings of USF faculty about the students in science and mathematics courses at the university

According to Dr. Meisels, the general reaction of the faculty is that students are not prepared for college level science or mathematics courses. Dr. Meisels says that the science and math classes the USF students may have taken were not very structured. “The students are not really motivated to work, or to think. They want the easy answers,” he states. Dr. Meisels states that this has been a problem for a long time at many universities. According to Dr. Meisels, the students are impatient and just want to memorize the answers for the exam. He says that most of the students react negatively when they are given a method or a way to solve a problem. He believes that this attitude is drilled into the students when they are in high school. “I think most of our assessment systems are drilled to get students to remember things rather than think things through,” Dr. Meisels states. “And that is a major shift that must take place. There’s a lot of talk about it. Those that already know what’s going on know it has to be done. But it’s not happening a lot,” he says.

Does USF have unique problems in relation to the science and mathematics departments?

Dr. Meisels states that the USF Science Department, more than any other, is very focused on research. According to Dr. Meisels, in the departments like science, outside money is more available to them. Dr. Meisels says, "So there's a lot of pressure on the science department to produce funding. That also means that the reward structure is geared towards rewarding outside money research publications and that sort of thing. This is not very helpful when it comes to improving what's going on in the classrooms." Some departments use temporary help or adjuncts just to deal with the larger numbers of undergraduates. According to Dr. Meisels, these departments are giving up their responsibilities so they do not have to deal with issues concerning students and teaching. Dr. Meisels says that the USF Chemistry Department should be given credit since the leadership understands that it has to do more to help the situation. He says that the Chemistry Department has a better insight as to what USF should do to help students.

Did Dr. Meisels think he would be at USF for fifteen years?

"Well, I never looked that far ahead," he says. When he left the provost position he could have found a job somewhere else or do something that he loves. "I liked the idea of doing what I'm doing. I like Tampa. I like the university. I did look at a couple of other jobs, but they were not that interesting," he says. "But to be honest with you, no, I did not think I would be here for fifteen years," Dr. Meisels says.

Dr. Meisels' opinion on where USF will be heading in the next fifteen years

He says that any projection you make at this point is highly uncertain. The USF budget will get a substantial cut this year (2003). "What's going to happen the next two, three, four or five years will have a very large influence on the way this institution develops," he says. Referring to the shaping of USF over the last few years, Dr. Meisels says this about USF's future: "I think USF will become a better university, the quality of its offerings will increase. It will be a more focused university. It will put more of its resources into selective areas rather than across the boards. It will continue to be a strong and even stronger research university." Dr. Meisels believes the buildings programs that are in place at the science facilities and engineering building will help enable the improvement of research at the university. Dr. Meisels says that these areas are to a large extent the areas where USF's reputation rests. "If you don't have a strong science area, you don't have a strong university," he says. He also believes that as USF matures and grows the attention paid to the quality of teaching will gradually increase. Dr. Meisels believes that the needed balance between quality teaching and research is not yet at USF. He says that USF does not have much competition in the area. He thinks that even though the St. Petersburg and Sarasota campuses will become more autonomous and cause competition, the Tampa campus will always be the leading institution in the area. Dr. Meisels does not think that this will change, and says that this is a real asset for the university.

End of Interview