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Preston Mercer oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 15, 2003

Leonard Preston Mercer (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Mercer came to USF Lakeland in 1999 as the vice president and CEO of the USF Lakeland campus.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Mercer to USF Lakeland

Before coming to USF Dr. Mercer had been at the University of Kentucky for nine years as the chair of the Nutrition and Food Science Department. He thought it was a good time in his career to look for a different position. He wanted a new challenge. Since both he and his family are from the South he looked for several administrative positions in the South. He got several interviews. The one at USF looked the most promising. He ended up on the regional campus.

What did he hear about USF before coming to the university?

He had not been that familiar with USF. It was more looking at job opportunities and seeing USF and doing his own investigating to see if it was a place that he would be interested in.

Why USF appealed to Dr. Mercer

He says that USF was appealing because it is a Research I university. He had spent his whole life involved not only in instruction, but also in research. Dr. Mercer wanted to be associated with a Research I university. Also, USF is a comprehensive university. His background is medical education. He was interested in being at a university that had a health campus. "The medical side was appealing to me just because of my medical research," states Dr. Mercer. USF was appealing to him because it is a large urban university where a lot goes on that is interesting. He says that at a large university there are many possibilities for collaborations with the large number of colleagues. Also, he says being able to interact with students is appealing. Dr. Mercer says the size of the university, and the comprehensiveness of the programs really appealed to him. "USF is a good place to grow in a scholarly way. There are a lot of pluses being at a big state university, especially in a big urban area," states Dr. Mercer.

Interview process

He interviewed on the Tampa campus. Then he went to the Lakeland campus to meet everyone on that campus. Dr. Mercer says since the governance of the regional campuses is through the main campus he had to meet the administration in Tampa first. He met the students, staff, and faculty, and saw the facilities at both campuses.

First impressions of the Tampa campus in 1999

“It is pretty impressive. USF is 1,000 acres. It has the Florida look: palm trees. It is very appealing when you drive up to it. It just looked like a good, solid, well-kept school. My wife said this is really impressive when we saw it the first time,” Dr. Mercer says.

What did the Lakeland campus look like in 1999?

The Lakeland campus was built in 1988. When he first saw it, it was just ten years old. The Lakeland campus is located in an orange grove. “It is a very nice campus. It’s very attractive. It is not large. The money was put into it to build a pleasant environment,” he states. Dr. Mercer also says the campus is quiet.

Free parking at the Lakeland campus

USF Lakeland has free parking. Dr. Mercer says free parking is one of the things for which people come to Lakeland.

Mission of a regional campus

Dr. Mercer says that regional campuses are important. He says the main topic of discussion for regional campuses around the country now is access—“the availability of place bound residents to get a quality state supported education without having to drive a long distance,” he states. Dr. Mercer says that people are getting degrees in Lakeland that otherwise would not be at USF because they do not have time to travel a long distance. Dr. Mercer says having a regional campus brings a world-class research faculty in to an area and helps the area to economically develop. Dr. Mercer says that when a business decides to relocate, usually the first question the business asks about a potential new area of location is what are the educational opportunities there. He says business ask this because they want to have educational opportunities for the family members of employees, and also because they like to have a trained work force which is available through a university. Also, he says the research interaction between industry and business and a regional campus is an economic magnet for a region. “Every time you see a regional campus go in someplace around the country usually you see economic development follow closely after that,” Dr. Mercer says.

What is Dr. Mercer’s mission for USF Lakeland?

Dr. Mercer says the first thing that a regional campus feels as it grows is where does it fit in to the overall scheme of things for the university. “Certainly we want to maintain our identity with the University of South Florida because that gives us our scholarly base and our academic identity. Even though we are growing we want to be seen as part of USF because that brings strength to the regional campus,” he says. Dr. Mercer says because he is vice president of a regional campus where the faculty is small he can have access to faculty from Tampa and bring over experts in a lot of different areas to teach. “As we

grow, first we want to stay clearly identified as part of USF. Our direction is to meet the regional needs of the service area. We will never offer all programs that people are interested in, but we will determine programs that are relevant to the economic development for the area that we serve. We interact with our community. We specialize and focus on programs, which are important to the interests and development of the area that we serve,” states Dr. Mercer.

USF Lakeland and the high tech corridor

Dr. Mercer says that USF Lakeland is in the middle of what Florida calls the high tech corridor. He says that USF Lakeland’s growth is certainly going to be in the high tech area and training computer scientists and business people. He says Florida has an interest in seeing growth. Dr. Mercer says that USF Lakeland is in the middle of Tampa and Orlando and two international airports so there is tremendous potential for growth.

Growth of USF Lakeland

Dr. Mercer says that USF Lakeland is the smallest campus, but it has been the fastest growing one for the past three years. “We are in a rapidly growing area of the state,” he says.

How does USF Lakeland work with the community?

To work with the community Dr. Mercer says that USF Lakeland has to get involved with the Board of Education, chambers of commerce, and businesses around town. “We make an effort to see that our faculty becomes members of organizations like Rotary or Kiwanis. We have faculty that our involved with the social life of the community,” he says. “You go to the large institutions and ask them what they need and what they would like to see from us as a university,” states Dr. Mercer. He says that since he has been at USF Lakeland the campus has written about four or five studies for the community. The campus is located in Polk County, which is the campus’s main service area. Dr. Mercer says that Polk County is a migrant area with a history of phosphate mining and citrus farming. Dr. Mercer says that they look at the cultural opportunities in Polk County. One of the first studies that he did involved the economic impact of the arts in Polk County. His study results showed that there is a tremendous opportunity for cultural activities in Polk County. This study then went to the Central Florida Development Council. The council puts the study in its portfolio. The council takes the study when it is recruiting business to the area. The council can tell businesses that the education is good in Polk County, but also there are cultural activities there too. “We’re doing studies just to put information out that people might not know about Polk County,” he says. Other studies conducted by Dr. Mercer and the campus includes a power plant study, a quality of life health survey, and a future of economic development study. “We are bringing information out that wouldn’t be done if the faculty wasn’t there that had an interest to do it,” says Dr. Mercer. He says that Polk County has 600,000 people spread among seventeen small towns. The service area the Lakeland campus serves is over 3,700 square miles. “We have ample opportunities to go out in the community. We go and find people and say what would you like for us to do and as we do that we get more and more response and people start realizing the power of having a regional campus in their area. I think that is one reason why we are growing rapidly,” states Dr. Mercer.

What is unique and special about the Lakeland campus?

“Our location is one of the things that makes us special—being very centrally located. Since we’re in the high tech corridor we started a department of information technology, which did not previously exist at USF,” Dr. Mercer states. The department of information technology will help to technologically prepare students as the central high tech corridor grows. Dr. Mercer says that USF Lakeland is also unique because of the faculty it has. He says the campus is growing in education, business, and information technology. But, now the campus is getting in to social sciences in the area of social work and interdisciplinary social sciences in the area of criminology. “We will be unique in the way that Polk County is unique. We will reflect what the needs of the county are and that is where we will put our resources and grow,” he states. Dr. Mercer says one thing that is missing from USF is nutrition. He says in the very near future USF Lakeland will start a nutrition and dietetic department. “Each campus will develop specialties that reflect the needs of their particular community,” says Dr. Mercer.

Student makeup at the Lakeland campus

Polk Community College owns the Lakeland campus. In Florida community colleges are not allowed to have dormitories. “We are a 100 percent commuter campus. Sixty percent of our classes are taught after five [o’clock] because most of our students are working people who are trying to improve their education or move up in their job area. Our average age is twenty-eight or twenty-nine. We don’t have the traditional student. We don’t teach freshmen or sophomores. We teach at the junior and senior levels,” he states. Dr. Mercer says that the Lakeland campus consists of mostly older people who work and live in the Lakeland area. “More and more we are reaching into the community because Lakeland is an easy place to get to because of I-4 and the Polk Parkway,” he says.

Addressing commuter needs

“We need to have good student services for the student whose time is limited because most people work and have families. We try to make it a smooth, seamless experience for students. We don’t have very many students who are around campus during the day and who have leisure time to wait between classes. We try to diminish the bureaucracy, and give them the answers they need,” Dr. Mercer says.

A new campus for USF Lakeland

Dr. Mercer says that with the growth of both USF Lakeland and Polk Community College, it has been recognized that for USF Lakeland to actually bloom as a regional campus of a Research I university it needs to have its own separate campus with dormitories, laboratories, a library, and a campus life. Dr. Mercer says that in general people who want a campus life have to leave Lakeland because the community college only serves freshmen and sophomores. Dr. Mercer says there are three or four private colleges in the Lakeland area, which are good, but expensive. He says several businesses have offered free land to the university because they recognize that if the university comes and builds on their land, the rest of the land they own adjacent to the campus will become far more valuable. “We have five sites that have been offered to us now. We

have a master campus planning organization looking at the five sites to help us choose which one will be in the best location for future growth and to serve our students. It will allow us to get off and be on our own campus and be the masters of our own future,” states Dr. Mercer.

Timeline for building the new campus

In July 2003 the committee will make a decision on which one of the sites Lakeland will choose. Then that will be presented to the university board of trustees. Then it is up to the Polk County legislative delegation to bring in the 140 million dollars it is going to cost to build a new campus, and that does not count dormitories. Dr. Mercer says if you add dormitories it is more like 190 million dollars. We hope to get started in the next couple of years. As soon as we get the land identified the donors come forward who have opportunities to leave a legacy by having a building named after them. The state is going to be the main source for the initial money. The land will be donated to the state, and each piece of land is probably worth ten million dollars.

Dr. Mercer’s primary responsibilities as vice president and CEO

Dr. Mercer says that even though he is vice president and reports to the president on the main campus, he feels like the president of his own campus. Dr. Mercer oversees everything, such as the academic programs, facilities, and student services. He says it is like running a business. He has to make sure that all of the pieces work together so students can have a smooth experience.

Where does Dr. Mercer see the Lakeland campus in 10 years?

Dr. Mercer says that in 2010 USF Lakeland is predicting its campus will have 5,000 students. In 1999 the campus had 700 students. Currently in 2003 the campus has 1800 students. He says that if the growth rate continues, by 2020 the campus should have 10,000 students. “Our main legislature, J.D. Alexander, told land donors to give enough land that would hold a campus for at least 10,000 students. That is the long-term goal,” he says.

Technology on campus

Dr. Mercer has an administrative team that works together to oversee information technology on the campus. “We are a technologically advanced campus,” he says. USF Lakeland just put in the infrastructure so that a student can immediately be online. It is a wireless campus.

Why is technology so important to the mission of the Lakeland campus?

“Part of it is because we find ourselves in the high tech corridor and there is an interest in developing technology there,” he states. Dr. Mercer says that developing technology in Polk County is more important now because agriculture is on the decline since big companies now run agriculture. Also, phosphate mining is more on the decline. “Technology helps us deliver our programs. Our ability to reach our student body involves technology now. Many of our courses are either totally online or have web based contact associated with them. Technology helps us be more efficient in expanding

our footprint because when we offer courses on line that could be all over the world,” states Dr. Mercer.

Other major programs at USF Lakeland

USF Lakeland’s biggest program is currently in education. Dr. Mercer says that in Florida the school district is the county. Polk County consists of over 3,500 square miles. Dr. Mercer says the county is an enormous school district with seventeen towns, one school board, 82,000 students, and 10,000 employees. The school district has a 750 million dollar budget. However, Polk County has a fifty percent graduation rate from high school. “So obviously there are some needs there. Just because it [school district] is so large makes it hard to manage,” states Dr. Mercer. The Lakeland campus just got a grant from the community and started a program called Quality School Leadership Symposium in which the Lakeland campus is training the next generation of principals for Polk County. Dr. Mercer says that education is the big push right now and to upgrade the educational opportunities in Polk County. Dr. Mercer says that business is also important at USF Lakeland. Also, engineering information technology is big for the campus. Publix headquarters is located in Lakeland. Dr. Mercer says that Publix hires 700 people in information technology. Dr. Mercer says this provides a big audience for his students in Lakeland. “Business, engineering information technology, and education are our big three. Arts and sciences is not as large, but we are growing in that direction. Next we will get in to allied health type things like nutrition and elderly care. Things that help the health of the community because Polk County has a large percentage of elderly people, higher than the national average,” he says.

What is the most challenging aspect of being vice president and CEO of a regional campus?

Dr. Mercer says the most challenging thing in Lakeland was to start realizing the potential of the campus’s location. When Dr. Mercer arrived in 1999 there was about 700 students and six faculty members. He says it was a pretty small and not well-known institution. “The big challenge is to market ourselves to the community and the capabilities that we have and what we bring to the table,” he says. In the four years that Dr. Mercer has been there the budget has tripled, the student body has almost tripled, and the institution’s relationship with the community is far more advanced than it was. He says part of the challenge was to get the institution known so that students choose USF Lakeland as their education provider. “Getting us up and running and known to the community has been the big challenge,” he says.

Relationship between the Lakeland campus and USF as a whole

Dr. Mercer says there is an academic and a political question. The political issue was that the regional campuses have enough autonomy to make locally based decisions to meet the needs of the local constituencies. Dr. Mercer says that decision was a good thing. “That gave us some power to make our own decisions. Being a regional campus of a Research I university to me personally is important. I think it is important to our community to have that connection because when a company comes to Lakeland they can get a reasonable price on land, but still be connected to a Research I university right down the street who has access directly in to the main campus,” he says. “It’s not so

much pulling away as it is growing specifically for their region, while still maintaining that identify of one university geographically dispersed,” states Dr. Mercer.

In his four years of history at USF Lakeland, what is Dr. Mercer most proud of?

Dr. Mercer is most proud of the staff and faculty at USF Lakeland. “The staff and faculty that we have brought on board have been tremendous. Because of the location of central Florida and the Tampa Bay region being so well known we’ve been able to attract top-notch faculty to this area,” he says. USF Lakeland has just gone over thirty faculty members on campus. The campus has eighty-five full-time employees. “We’ve been able to bring in top notch people. This has been reflected by our growth rate which has been twenty-five or thirty percent every semester,” he says. “We beat every other campus in growth rate because of the good work our faculty and staff do,” states Dr. Mercer.

Design plans of the new Lakeland campus

Dr. Mercer says they want the new campus to look like Florida. USF Lakeland hired a company who designs master plans for campuses. The campus gave the company information on the projected enrollment and the programs the campus is interested in. The company cannot design a master plan until it sees the sites. Dr. Mercer says the five projected sites look totally different. When the company sees the sites, starts thinking about what programs are going to be growing and how many students the campus thinks it will have then a design can be chosen. “We are spending a lot of time looking at other universities. We want to have something that looks great for central Florida. We’re working together with the company. Once we choose the site then we know more about the land then we can move ahead to what our campus is going to look like. It is a very exciting thing to be able to do,” states Dr. Mercer.

Dr. Mercer’s last words about USF Lakeland

Dr. Mercer says the goal of the Lakeland campus is quality. He believes they are achieving this goal. “We’re going to be a quality campus with quality offerings. I recommend anyone to come and give us a try. The students that we turn out are being successful because we invest our lives in to the life of the Lakeland campus and the community. The people who work at Lakeland care about Lakeland, enjoy being there and they want it to be successful. We’re going to be the best that we can be. We have the opportunity to bring in the best now because we’re in a growth mode. Why choose Lakeland?—quality,” states Dr. Mercer.

End of Interview