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# Harold Nixon oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, August 5, 2003

Harold Nixon (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
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Current Position: USF Vice President  
of Student Affairs  
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Year of arrival*

Dr. Nixon came to USF in March of 1994 as Vice President of Student Affairs.

*Circumstances that brought Dr. Nixon to USF*

President Betty Castor recruited Dr. Nixon. She had just been elected president of USF when Dr. Nixon arrived. She was interviewed on campus at the same time Dr. Nixon was in December of 1993. As soon as Betty Castor was appointed president she contacted Dr. Nixon and they talked about whether or not he would come to USF. At the time, Dr. Nixon was the Vice President of Student Affairs at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. As the conversations between Dr. Nixon and President Castor progressed, as he talked with President Castor more, and as he visited the campus several times, coming to USF seemed like a natural fit. President Castor indicated to Dr. Nixon that he could help her begin her administration. Dr. Nixon liked President Castor. Once USF seemed like a good fit for Dr. Nixon, he decided to come. Dr. Nixon was attracted to USF not only because he would be working for someone he thought would be a good president, but also because of the students he came into contact with during his several visits to the university. He spoke with SG leaders and other students. The students were looking for someone they thought would be a good fit and would work with them. He had several conversations with the students themselves. “It seemed like a good fit for me to come to the University of South Florida, so I came.”

*Differences between Wright State University and USF*

Dr. Nixon says the fact is Wright State and USF are quite similar. They are both metropolitan universities. Wright State was founded a few years after USF. Both universities have the same colors—green and gold. The universities are similar even down to the actual directional signage. The signs all look the same and are made out of the same material. Wright State is smaller in enrollment than USF. The curriculum and academic programs are different. Students have more opportunities to major in more at USF than at Wright State University. When Dr. Nixon was at Wright State, the university was building more housing and a student union. Overall, Dr. Nixon says there are more similarities than differences between the two institutions.

*Dr. Nixon first notices the lack of student housing on campus*

The first time he came to USF was during his interview process. The most notable thing on campus was the fact that USF had few residence halls. Concerning enrollment numbers in 1994, Dr. Nixon says an institution of USF's size at the time, normally would have as much housing as USF does now. Dr. Nixon says knowing that USF is and was a metropolitan university, he was not too surprised to find few student residences.

*Surrounding area of USF*

When Dr. Nixon examined the surrounding area of USF, he paid the most attention to suitcase city because of its proximity to the campus. He thought that such a place could cause significant problems in terms of crime and other things on the campus. During his visits, he went through the area, and he determined that it was very important for the university to do more along the lines of housing simply to make sure that students had options to live in places other than suitcase city.

*President Castor and Dr. Nixon discuss residential housing*

As President Castor and Dr. Nixon talked, the notion was to eliminate as much as possible USF's commuter campus image and have the university become more of a residential campus.

*Changes in the design of campus housing occurs in order to attract more resident students*

Dr. Nixon says when he first arrived, the proportion of student enrollment versus the number of student living in residential halls was very uneven. First, he and others set out to make certain that those facilities already in existence were in good enough condition to attract students. The residence halls were built in the 1960s and 1970s and they were designed in a more dormitory traditional style with long halls and corridors and gang bathrooms at the end of each hallway. That was not the type of facility in which students were looking to spend their entire college career. Dr. Nixon says that while there were some students who were interested in living on campus there were not enough students to fill all the bed spaces already in existence because the facilities were not in the shape or configuration that students desired. Dr. Nixon says the residence plan was to first make certain that they considered renovating the halls to bring them up to proper condition. Second, Dr. Nixon and his team had to think in terms of building new facilities because they wanted to not only fill the bed spaces already in existence, but also they wanted to attract new students. The configuration of the new halls had to be attractive to students. This meant the new halls had to be more like apartments and suites.

*Dr. Nixon puts together a resident hall committee*

In order to come up with a proper student residence design plan, Dr. Nixon put together a huge group of individuals from across the university and appointed them to a committee. Dr. Nixon asked them to give full consideration to the needs of students and to those things that would attract students and that would help recruit students to the university. An individual in the provost office, Dr. Bernard Mackey, chaired the committee. Dr. Nixon asked people in the College of Business to chair subcommittees. Also, Student

Affairs individuals were involved with the committee. The committee consisted of fifty-five people, and was probably one of the largest committees put together on the campus.

#### *The committee comes up with a residence hall plan*

The committee worked for about one year, divided up into sub groups and came back together and presented Dr. Nixon with a plan. He then presented it to the president. The plan is a comprehensive fifteen-year plan designed to move USF forward in terms of enhancing the residence hall facilities. The plans called for the renovation of existing halls. They decided not to try and reconfigure the existing halls, but renovate them. For example, Alpha Hall, the first residence hall built on campus, was completely renovated and reconfigured. "But, as we thought about, the cost to do it that way was just too much for us. We knew that we were not going to be able to complete the overall plan of growth if we retrofitted each of the halls in terms of reconfiguring them," he says. Alpha Hall was the only hall that was retrofitted. The rest of the halls have been renovated. Beta Hall is being renovated and is offline, meaning no students can live there right now. Beta Hall will reopen in 2004. Gamma Hall was renovated and renamed Castor Hall.

#### *Why was Gamma Hall renamed Castor Hall?*

Dr. Nixon says Gamma Hall was renamed Castor Hall because of President Castor's undying support for Dr. Nixon and his committee and the facilities that they were attempting to develop.

#### *Dr. Nixon comments on the success of the plan*

Dr. Nixon says that what caused all of the planning and developing to come together was the significant and great support everyone had to the plans. He says all of the people involved in the committee, the people on his staff, the president, and the vice-president all came together and said "we must do something better for the students." Dr. Nixon says that when he first arrived in 1994 and spoke with students, they were talking about how they had been told for several years that the residence halls were going to be improved. He says the students had simply lost hope of having the halls renovated. "But, one can look around now and see that things have in fact changed," he says.

#### *Funding the residence halls project*

When Dr. Nixon started to visit the then BOR and ask if they could help USF find a way to do the financing of the facilities, he was told that the university's financial strength was not enough to build the halls and do the master renovation and building plan that was put together. "What we decided was if we were going to do it, we were going to do it ourselves. We couldn't afford to allow our halls condition to continue," he says. Dr. Nixon and his team started working with individuals out in the financial world, such as banks. Financial advisors started telling them about more creative things to do in terms of financing rather than doing regular financing, which involves going through the state and the department of bond finance. Dr. Nixon and his team decided to ask the USF Foundation if it would become the financial umbrella for the project, 501C3. To accomplish this, student affairs would have to borrow money, which means bonding. Dr. Nixon went forward with that request to the foundation. At the time, the chairman of the foundation was Rick Brown. "He was as understanding and as supportive as anybody

could be,” he says. Dr. Nixon proposed the comprehensive plan to him. Rick Brown said that it was something he thought the foundation should support. BOT leases the land to the foundation to build the facilities. The foundation literally builds the residence halls and then leases the halls back to the institution to operate. It is called a lease-lease back arrangement. Student Affairs is very involved on both ends, in relation to the university’s responsibility and the foundation’s responsibility. All decisions about the residence halls flow through Student Affairs, who then communicates it to the foundation leadership, who then approves it.

#### *Unique features of residence halls*

USF’s newer residence halls offer the same type of amenities that an apartment offers. If a student wants to cook his or her own food, they have that opportunity. Also, the halls offer students their own bathrooms or bathrooms that a few people share. Also, students like to have their own space to study, surf the Internet, and turn their televisions on. The apartment or suite style set up gives students more privacy to do their own thing. Living in residence halls gives students the opportunity to walk to class or the recreational center. Students are in close proximity to food service and recreational places—all attractive to students.

#### *Housing options for non-traditional students*

A second set of beds was built in 2000 for married students. The residence hall is located on Magnolia Drive. Dr. Nixon says the married housing filled up a lot quicker than the other non-traditional bed spaces. “We have probably maxed-out in terms of non-traditional bed spaces,” he says. Dr. Nixon says if they can find a way to balance the types of housing, they will expand married housing, which requires more square feet.. There is non-traditional housing available on campus for the single student. He says students are not finding that as attractive as they find some of the apartments off campus. “That is changing a bit as we go down the road. Anytime you do a new type of housing, sometimes it takes a while for it to catch on.”

#### *USF’s success in reaching its residence hall goal*

Dr. Nixon says USF intends to move the housing capacity to 5,000. In the comprehensive study, consultants for the residence plan determined that there was a demand for campus housing at 10,000 students. But, USF decided to go the conservative route in building residence halls. “It doesn’t make sense to do the ‘build it and they will come.’ You have to have the demand so you don’t have empty bed spaces. But, we determined we would cut the demand from what the consultants told us in half, and build 5,000 beds. We are approaching that number now,” he says. When USF builds the next 500 to 600 beds in the next two or three years it will hit the 5,000 mark. Dr. Nixon says every bed is full. In 2002 to 2003, USF had to rent space from Fontana Hall. USF filled Fontana Hall with 400 to 500 students. When the next 600 beds open, those students will come back to campus.

#### *Residence plan*

“We have been very successful. We are on the right track,” he says.

### *Demolishing the Village buildings*

USF has taken down some old facilities, including the Village, which consisted of wooden structures. “It was too costly to continue to invest money into those facilities. So we decided to take them down and in their place build Greek housing.”

### *Greek housing*

In the fall of 2003, USF will open fourteen Greek housing buildings for fourteen different organizations. “The students seem awfully excited about it. I’m convinced that it is going to add an awful lot to student life at USF.” When the fifteen-year residence plan began, Rick Brown, who was president of the USF Foundation at the time, was also a student and a Greek. Dr. Nixon says when coming up with the residence plan, their thoughts on Greek housing were that it will help build student life and help the institution move away from the notion that it is “just a commuter institution.” Dr. Nixon says there is nothing wrong with a commuter type institution. He says that what is not good are the many negatives associated with the fact that USF is a commuter institution. For example, in terms of recruiting students, many potential students say going to USF is like going to high school. The institution does not provide certain types of amenities that potential students are looking for. Most students are looking for a different kind of experience once they graduate from high school. Phyllis Marshall and Rick Brown talked about the possibility of Greek housing. Dr. Nixon says the idea of having Greek housing at USF had been around for fifteen to eighteen years. Land had been designated to build Greek housing near Pizzo Elementary School. However, the Greek organizations themselves could not find the resources to make it happen. “Our students have struggled for a long time to find a way to finance housing.” Dr. Nixon says as they developed the overall housing plan, the Greek plan fell into place. Student Affairs decided to build the housing and lease the buildings to the Greeks themselves.

### *New student union*

Next for Student Affairs is a new student union. “Students tell us over and over again that they want a better student union and they want more space. They want to make certain that they have meeting rooms, more study space, more venues for food, and a larger ballroom.” Dr. Nixon says plans are in place to build a new student union. It looks like the new student union will be in the same location although the current facility will not be torn down, but will be renovated. There is room in the area to bring into existence a new center. Dr. Nixon says that last year the student leadership voted to raise their own fees in order to finance the student union. There is a feasibility study being conducted now. “We hope in the next year we will begin to build this next facility.”

### *Besides residential housing, other issues President Castor and Dr. Nixon discussed*

Both Dr. Nixon and President Castor discussed student life in general. They wanted to address the concern of there not being many activities and programs on campus that cause students to want to stay on the campus as opposed to preferring to be off campus. Dr. Nixon and President Castor discussed how they would go about building a stronger student life program. Dr. Nixon says even in 1994 there was the notion that a student union was necessary. While there is a student union, the Marshall Center, there was the notion that at some point USF would outgrow that facility. Dr. Nixon says since USF has

outgrown the Marshall Center, they are attempting to come forward with a new Marshall Center, a new student union, which will be more accommodating of the programs and the student organizations that exist on campus. Also, President Castor and Dr. Nixon discussed building a stronger Greek life program, and they began thinking about having some type of Greek housing to accommodate the organizations. Greek housing will open in the fall of 2003. Also, President Castor and Dr. Nixon talked about partnerships with other parts of the university, such as Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, two administrative areas that Dr. Nixon says must move forward hand in hand.

#### *Organization of Student Affairs*

Student Affairs contains the office of enrollment planning and management. Enrollment planning and management consists of admissions, financial aid, career services, the registrar's office, and advising. Next, Student Affairs contains student life and wellness, which consists of fourteen different departments, such as the Marshall Center, SG, student discipline, the counseling center, and recreation. The University Police makes up the third component of Student Affairs.

#### *Dr. Nixon's involvement with student enrollment*

Enrollment planning and management is a part of Student Affairs overall organization. Recruiting and retaining students has been a huge part of Dr. Nixon's portfolio as vice president of student affairs. The admissions office is responsible for finding and making sure that USF has the type of students that it would like enrolled here. Freshmen enrollment grew in 1994 from 2,300 to 5,000 in 2003. President Genshaft has indicated that she wants to make certain that USF attracts students at the number and caliber it wants. USF set forth a 5,000 plan, and has reached its goal in 2003.

#### *Type of students USF wants*

USF is moving in the direction of raising the SAT scores overall average to a level it would like to have in order to attract a certain caliber of students. Dr. Nixon is not sure that the caliber of students USF wants now has changed much from the early days. He says that what has changed is that USF is now actually attracting those types of students. "We want a better mix of students graduating in the top ten percent of their high school class. We want a better mix of those students with higher SAT scores. We want a better mix of those students who are of national merit quality. We set forth each year to raise that number. We want to make sure the trend line continues to go up. Although we are recruiting more students each year, we want to see the percent of the class grow."

#### *Minority students*

"We are attracting more minorities each year. In 2000 we had a significant growth in minority students, especially blacks. We had a huge growth that year. We knew the next year we would not be able to sustain that kind of growth. However, when you look back at the average, our trend line continues to move up. We can look at the numbers and say the balance continues to occur in the right direction."

*Dr. Nixon helps to create a master's program in college student affairs*

College Student Affairs is a master's degree program in conjunction with the leadership of the College of Education and the faculty. They decided that USF is a good place to train people to become professional student affairs individuals. It took about two to three years until the curriculum was in place. Dr. William Henry, who had been doing similar work at Wright State University in the College of Education as a faculty member, was recruited to come to USF to help put the program together. Dr. Nixon says they have about 20 students each year. "We train them in the classroom and teach them about student affairs. Then we provide students with practical experience by assigning them to the various departments in student affairs. We have graduated about eighty students who have gotten jobs in institutions across the country. We have been extraordinarily pleased. We always have a waiting list of students who would like to come to the program, but we don't have the space for them and we want to keep it at the size we're at because we want to make certain that we do a quality job. It's a win-win for the division of student affairs; it's a win-win for the College of Education; it's a win-win for the graduate school in terms of the development of graduate credit hours; and it's a win-win for the students."

*What is Dr. Nixon most proud of in his nine years at USF?*

"I'm proud of the fact that I've been entrusted with the leading of an area that consists of a number of individuals who believe that their calling is to serve students. I'm very proud of the fact that we have a group of dedicated individuals who work very hard. I'm proud of our students here. When I look around at other institutions and match our students up with the students at other campuses, there certainly is enough that is seen to be proud of. At the end of the day building facilities just cannot compare to helping students and individuals develop into great human beings."

*Where does Dr. Nixon see USF in ten years?*

"I'm a believer that this university's song has not been written. I think that as we talk about the metropolitan university, Research I university, there is no question in my mind that a university with all of the creativity and talent that exists here, I don't believe that there is any reason why this institution can't be not just a babe in the woods. There is no reason why this university won't mature and take its rightful place right at the top of the Research I list. [In doing that], all of the other pieces fall into place."

*Closing words*

"I think I would say that creativity got us this far, and I believe that creativity can take us to heights unknown, and always attempt to be as creative as they can possibly be. They should work to that end."

*End of Interview*