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Susan Northcutt oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, May 28, 2003

Susan Northcutt (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Northcutt came to USF in 1969 as an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Northcutt to USF

In 1969 Dr. Northcutt was on the job market. She was a graduate student at Indiana University. Her boyfriend wanted to settle in Florida. She interviewed for several jobs. Dr. Northcutt received job offers from four different institutions. She received two offers from institutions in Florida, one of which was USF. Russel Cooper, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, interviewed Dr. Northcutt for the position. Her interview went very well. She decided to accept the position at USF. The reason she decided on USF was because it was a state university. Since it was a state university, she was familiar with it. Dr. Northcutt was and still remains very committed to public higher education. She felt comfortable at USF because of its size and the nature of the institution.

What the USF campus looked like in 1969

“USF looked like an industrial site. There was a lot of sand – not many trees. There were more parking lots than buildings. The buildings were dull and rather unimpressive,” says Dr. Northcutt.

Dr. Northcutt’s office and classrooms in 1969 (in the Social Science Building)

Her office was on third floor of the Social Science Building. It had been opened two years when Dr. Northcutt arrived. She says the building still smelled new when she arrived. The building was full of classrooms and offices. There were hardly any windows in the classrooms. “I felt like I was teaching in cement block caves,” she says.

Surrounding area in 1969

Dr. Northcutt says both Fowler and Fletcher were two lane roads, and both were congested.

Teaching summer school in 1969

Dr. Northcutt says that teaching summer school was expected. “Although we were on nine-month contracts, it was expected, especially for the junior faculty members. I found myself teaching twelve months a year. I was surprised at that. I did not expect that,” says Dr. Northcutt.

Buildings on campus in 1969

Dr. Northcutt says in 1969 there were not many building on the east side of campus like there are today. The library was located in what is now called the Students Services Building. Dr. Northcutt says the library was adequate at the time. The old business school was housed in what is now called the Human Services Building. The University Lecture Hall was open. Both Classroom Building A and the Behavioral Sciences Building were nonexistent in 1969.

Quarter system in 1969

In 1969 USF was on a quarter system. Dr. Northcutt comments on the quarter system, “It seemed as if I were giving tests and assigning final grades every time I turned around.”

President of USF in 1969

John Allen was the president of USF in 1969. Dr. Northcutt heard a lot about President Allen during her interview process at USF and through other people. Dr. Northcutt says the major thing that was discussed about President Allen was that he built a university from scratch. She says that was widely discussed as were the challenges posed by such a formidable task. “He was a grand figure. One of considerable prestige and respect when I joined the faculty,” states Dr. Northcutt. Dr. Northcutt never had an opportunity to meet him. She says there were very few social events on campus. She attended the formal university address every year, but never met President Allen personally.

Number of students at USF in 1969

In 1969 11,000 students were enrolled at USF.

Number of students in Dr. Northcutt’s classes in 1969

She had thirty to thirty-five students in her classes. A class with thirty to thirty-five students was considered large.

Courses Dr. Northcutt taught in 1969

She had a lot of different assignments. She taught American National Government, American Foreign Policy, International Relations, and Comparative Politics. At the graduate level she taught a course on research methods in political science. Since USF was on the quarter system, Dr. Northcutt taught all of these courses for three semesters.

Master’s program in political science

The master’s program in political science began in 1969.

Currently there is no doctorate program in political science at USF.

Dr. Northcutt was hired by USF partly to teach at the graduate level

Dr. Northcutt says that part of the rationale for hiring her in 1969 was because she was trained to teach methodologies.

Dr. Northcutt describes her undergraduate students

Dr. Northcutt says there were not many freshmen in her classes because in the late 1960s, USF did not aggressively recruit first and second year students. Dr. Northcutt says, "It was mainly a university where transfer students at the junior level joined." Most of her students were juniors and seniors. Describing her students, Dr. Northcutt says, "I found them well prepared. They had attended junior colleges." Dr. Northcutt says she found them well prepared especially when she compares them to the students she has today. Describing her earlier students, Dr. Northcutt states, "They were more curious. Their reading and writing skills were better developed. Their interest in politics seemed to be more genuine. Their attention spans were better then."

Dr. Northcutt describes her graduate students

"The graduate students were enthusiastic because the political science master's program was the first one in the area. We had all sorts of people applying. Most of them were in their late twenties or thirties," she says.

Dr. Northcutt chairs thesis committees

She became a member of every thesis committee and chaired several of them. She has chaired forty thesis committees, many of which were in the early years of the program.

Why were early students interested in political science?

Dr. Northcutt says in the early days students' interests in political science were in part because of the general political interest among the population as a whole. She says the interests were prompted in large part by the Vietnam War. Students remained very interested in the war for a long time.

Vietnam protests

Dr. Northcutt does not recall protests on campus. She was quite taken by the contrast of USF and other institutions where protests were much more common.

The Department of Political Science was a part of which college in 1969?

The Department of Political Science was part of the Division of Social Sciences, which was one of several divisions that constituted the College of Liberal Arts. Within two or three years after Dr. Northcutt arrived, the College of Liberal Arts was disassembled. Four separate colleges were created, College of Arts and Sciences, College of Natural Sciences, College of Fine Arts, and College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The department of Political Science became part of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

In which building was the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences housed?

Most of the social and behavioral science courses were taught in the Social Science Building. The classrooms and offices were located there. The Behavioral Sciences

Building was constructed in the 1970s.

Faculty in the Department of Political Science

Dr. Northcutt says the political science faculty was diverse. She felt immediately at home, especially because there were two women on the faculty. Dr. Northcutt says women were not always on faculties in other departments, so she felt particularly blessed. The faculty members were mostly of all ages. “It was a fairly representative lot in terms of background and government experience,” she states.

Faculty interaction among the different departments

Dr. Northcutt says there was a lot of faculty interaction among the departments. When she was advising she got to meet people outside of her department.

Dr. Northcutt becomes undergraduate advisor

Dr. Northcutt was asked to be the undergraduate advisor for the Department of Political Science. “There is a general notion that women are very good at advising,” she says. Dr. Northcutt consented and found that she was good at advising and rather enjoyed it.

Dr. Northcutt represents the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences on a university wide committee dealing with undergraduate petitions

Dr. Northcutt was asked to represent the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences on a university wide committee called the Academic Regulations Committee. The committee reviews all of the petitions of undergraduate students asking for waivers or exceptions to rules and policies. All of the colleges are represented on the committee. Dr. Northcutt says it is a faculty role rather than an administrative one. She began interviewing students in different departments who wanted one thing or another. She was exposed to students in other disciplines and to the other colleges. She enjoyed this.

Dr. Northcutt asked to be on committee concerned with the tenure and promotion of faculty members

Dr. Northcutt says the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences was taking the lead on the USF campus to devise tenure and promotion rules for faculty. She was selected by the Department of Political Science to serve on a college wide committee to implement the rules and apply the guidelines. She was elected chair. The committee began in 1974 or 1975. The committee did tenure and promotion. In the first year, the committee had to deal with the first major budget problem. The committee had to advise the various deans of the colleges on what sorts of cuts needed to be made. Dr. Northcutt says the experience she had on the committee was a major reason for why she was selected to enter collegiate administration as Assistant Dean of the College of Behavioral Sciences.

Dr. Northcutt becomes assistant dean for the college in the mid 1970's

Dr. Northcutt says that becoming assistant dean for the college was a risky move because women had not broken that glass ceiling. Women had been appointed to collegiate administrative positions in both education and nursing, but not outside those traditional areas. Dr. Northcutt was the first woman to enter collegiate administration.

Dr. Northcutt's main responsibilities and initiatives as assistant dean

As assistant dean she took over academic affairs and worked closely with undergraduate and graduate students. Dr. Northcutt was involved with curriculum development, program planning, and faculty development issues, such as tenure and promotion. She also assumed responsibility of college wide planning. Dr. Northcutt enjoyed being assistant dean.

Dr. Northcutt's transition from professor to administrator

Dr. Northcutt says the transition from professor to administrator was not difficult because the academic values were the same. The skills she had developed in the classroom helped her while she was an assistant dean with things such as meetings. As she left administration the skills she learned helped her to understand classroom and scholarship better. She left collegiate administration in the mid 1980s.

Dr. Northcutt was assistant dean, and then promoted to associate dean, and then interim dean for a time

The power and influence of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

The College of Social and Behavioral Sciences was the largest college on campus. Dr. Northcutt says the college had considerable leverage, influence, and power. This made it easier for programs to be added or strengthened. The college received a lot of additional monies that were often from the state legislature.

The number of women faculty increases in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

As the faculty grew, more and more women joined the faculty. By the late 1970s and early 1980s there were between thirty and forty women who were part of the faculty of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Dr. Northcutt establishes a women's caucus in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

As the number of women faculty members increased in the college, Dr. Northcutt began a women's caucus. The caucus met once a month. The caucus provided a place to network. It helped for women in the college to get to know one another. Dr. Northcutt says life long friendships developed because of the caucus. During the meetings women would tell stories and talk about issues facing women in the college or in their respected professions. The caucus lasted for three or four years.

Dr. Northcutt founded the USF chapter of Pi Gamma Mu

Pi Gamma Mu is a social science honor society that focuses on students who are majors in one of the traditional or applied social sciences. It was founded in 1924. It came to USF in 1979. Dr. Northcutt is the founder of the Pi Gamma Mu chapter at USF. As associate dean she came across Pi Gamma Mu. She got in touch with the honor society and established a chapter on the campus. She says the honor society has a very strong faculty leadership.

Why did Dr. Northcutt decide to leave administration and go back to teaching?

She was burned out and tired. “There is a time to move on. Administrative life is fast paced and there is a lot of pressure involved,” she says.

Political Science becomes part of the Department of Government and International Affairs

The Department of Government and International Affairs is in the College of Arts and Sciences. The department includes political science, public administration, and international studies, all of which were departments or programs in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The transition to Arts and Sciences took place in the late 1980s.

How is it being in the College of Arts and Sciences?

Describing being a part of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Northcutt says, “The distance between the dean and a faculty member is so long. You lose the sense of community.”

Changes at USF that Dr. Northcutt has seen over the years

One of the major changes that Dr. Northcutt has seen is the beautification of the campus. “It has character and beauty now that it did not have when I first came. I’m stuck by the emphasis on cars and parking lots and the convenience that one attaches to commuting. Commuting becomes the defining characteristic of the university. It is not defined by residential faculty or students. This means that we are not here on Friday afternoons. When you have a homecoming parade, it is hard to find people on campus. It is difficult to find faculty members in their offices outside of their traditional office hours,” she says.

Dr. Northcutt is chair of the Diversity Committee from 1998-2001 (committee is not on campus)

The Diversity Committee is not a part of the university. An organization called the International Studies Association, the ISA, asked Dr. Northcutt to be vice president of the association and also asked her to focus on diversity. She established the Diversity Committee, which has several members from around the world.

Any last words that Dr. Northcutt would like to leave behind

“Support and love public higher education,” she states.

End of Interview