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Barbara Petersen oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, May 28, 2003

Barbara K. Petersen (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Petersen came to USF in August of 1991 as an assistant professor in the school of mass communications.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Petersen to USF

She came to USF right after completing her Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. When Dr. Petersen graduated from college in 1969 she was trained to be a journalist. She worked in the field for a few years. She soon learned how tough the field was. She then got into the field of public relations. Dr. Petersen then held a corporate public affairs position in Michigan for a gas and electric utility company. During the time in Michigan her title was supervisor of public relations research. She had no training about how to conduct quantitative research methods. She always wanted to learn how to conduct research. She decided to get her doctorate. She chose the University of Michigan. The doctorate program she pursued was called the Interdepartmental Doctorate in Mass Communications. Her major coursework involved social sciences research and legal and ethical issues of communication. After completing her Ph.D. she began to look at opportunities around the U.S. that she would be interested in pursuing. She and her husband had grown up in the north and were very tired of snow, rain, and ice. She applied from the east coast to the west coast across the bottom of the United States. Of all the opportunities offered her, the one at USF appealed to her the most. One thing that appealed to her the most was the fact that she would have the opportunity to build something.

Why was Dr. Petersen hired by USF?

She was brought to USF primarily because of her public relations experience and to build the public relations graduate program. She was also brought to USF because of the flexibility she had in teaching. She had experience in journalism and social science research and theory. "It fit well with the department that you have a variety of experiences," states Dr. Petersen. In addition to the public relations graduate program, Dr. Petersen was given the Communications Law course to teach her first semester at USF.

First time Dr. Petersen saw the USF campus

She came to USF in December of 1990 for an interview. Dr. Petersen had been to Florida before, but not to Tampa. “December in Tampa is gorgeous. I was dismayed because of all the cement and the institutional looking buildings,” she states. Dr. Petersen was thrilled when USF planted trees at the main entrance. Dr. Petersen says she knew USF was an urban university and how urban universities appear, but she was used to the schools in Michigan and Iowa. Those schools had large buildings and a lot of shade. USF’s physical appearance made her think there is going to be a lot of work to do, but she was ready to help participate in the building and growing process.

Dr. Petersen’s interviews before being hired

During her interviews, Dr. Petersen remembers being told about all the opportunities to grow at USF.

The School of Mass Communications’ location in 1991

When Dr. Petersen arrived at USF in August of 1991 the School of Mass Communications was crowded into a small suite on the fourth floor of Cooper Hall. The school moved into a new building, CIS, in December of 1991. Dr. Petersen says the CIS building was under construction for ten years from the time building plans were drawn up to the opening of the building. Dr. Petersen says the School of Mass Communications needs studios with technological equipment. However, when the school was located in Cooper Hall there was not enough room for the equipment that the school needed. “You can only do so much in the classroom with out physical apparatus,” she states. Dr. Petersen says this about being in Cooper Hall for those few months, “It was memorable, but forgettable as well.”

Components of the School of Mass Communications

Mass Communications is an interdisciplinary school. It has the distinction of being a scholarly and practical field.

The Department of Mass Communications changes its name to School of Mass Communications

A few years after Dr. Petersen arrived, the Mass Communications Department changed its name to the School of Mass Communications in order to reflect the fact that the Mass Communications programs were doing practical training. In the CIS building the School of Mass Communications has a full operating studio for broadcast, recording and editing rooms for radio and television, photo labs, and dedicated computer rooms for writing classes. The School of Mass Communications is preparing students for jobs. Dr. Petersen says preparing students for jobs has its benefits, but is also one of the hardest things to do. “We are going to train you to get a job, but we can’t promise you anything,” she states. Dr. Petersen believes the job market for college graduates is disturbing.

Dr. Petersen’s role in the School of Mass Communications

Her role in helping transition mass communications from a department to a school was two-fold. The only other public relations professor did not have a Ph.D. or an interest in

scholarly research. The professor had the practical ways to teach public relations students. Dr. Petersen's role was to teach students about theory and research. Graduate program started with a general media studies degree, or a master of arts. Dr. Petersen started building a curriculum for public relations when she first arrived. She set a curriculum that required theory, research, and outside work.

Student requirements to enter the School of Mass Communications

First, students have to pass the EDT, the English Diagnostic Test. Students must have an overall GPA of 2.75 to enter the school. Dr. Petersen says the GPA requirement keeps the number of majors lower. Mass Communications is a closed school. Also, students have to pass two basic courses in mass communications before they can enter their particular program. These two courses are Mass Communications and Society and Writing for the Mass Media. USF's School of Mass Communications is an accrediting program. Dr. Petersen says a quarter of the programs nationwide have the accrediting program.

Mass Communications program placed on probation

Dr. Petersen says the entire Mass Communications program, including undergraduate and graduate, was placed on probation by the accrediting agency. Dr. Petersen says they were placed on probation because of issues like control of funding, which the school did not have, and equipment issues. The school did not have an appropriate supply of equipment until it moved into the CIS building. Also, the faculty was not doing enough research. Dr. Petersen says the faculty had a lot of practical experience, but no research experience. She says that early on USF hired people with master's degrees who did not go on for Ph.D's. Dr. Petersen says that affected how the School of Mass Communications could achieve accreditation. Dr. Petersen says the school was also seriously understaffed. Budget cuts affected the university in the 1980s. Dr. Petersen says if someone retired or left mass communications, Arts and Sciences would pull back that position and give it over to another department. "The accrediting agency said you can't keep doing that. You have to give this field the adequate number of professors. So there were relationship issues between how the school could operate and how the dean of Arts and Sciences could operate. The accreditation agency put the university on notice saying it needed to change that structure and provide the funding necessary in order for the program to achieve accrediting status," states Dr. Petersen. Dr. Petersen says achieving accreditation involved many people building their programs. "We ultimately achieved complete accreditation after a number of years, but we had to build a lot of that," states Dr. Petersen.

Uniqueness of CIS building

There are four departments located in the CIS building. These departments are Mass Communications, Communications, Library and Information Sciences, and Management Information Systems. Dr. Petersen says the MIS connection has never been made. "Uniqueness was not only that it was a new building, but some interdisciplinary was supposed to be going on," she states.

Dr. Petersen becomes director of graduate studies

From 1995 to 2001 Dr. Petersen was the director of graduate studies for the School of Mass Communications. Dr. Petersen says there has always been a graduate committee made up of elected faculty. Dr. Petersen was on the committee while she was building the graduate curriculum for public relations. Dr. Petersen says the School of Mass Communications hired a new director in 1995. The new director wanted to choose a director of graduate studies. He wanted someone who could organize and build the program. Faculty members recommended Dr. Petersen. The director chose her.

Changes Dr. Petersen made as director of the graduate studies program

One change she made required graduate students to come in for advising at least once a year. There was no organization or forms about who was in what class. Dr. Petersen organized that. Also, professors taught whenever they wanted to in the graduate program. Dr. Petersen believed they needed to think about students' needs as opposed to the faculty members' preferences. She coordinated class offerings so that students would not have impossible choices. The graduate classes are only offered at night. Dr. Petersen organized it so that required courses were not offered on the same night. Also, Dr. Petersen began building the reputation of the school, recruiting students, and finding graduate assistantships. Before she became director, the graduate program did not have any graduate assistantships to offer. USF allowed Dr. Petersen graduate assistantships if the student's position was significantly related to the student's field. Dr. Petersen says there are a multitude of public relations opportunities across campus to work in that field and have practical training. She placed students in public affairs offices, places of business in the Marshall Center and the library, and in the Alumni Affairs Center. Dr. Petersen placed students in offices on campus that needed people to do newsletters and come up with communication tactics.

Dr. Petersen's involvement with a comprehensive communications plan for the library system

She has taught a graduate seminar called public relations counseling, which is social science research training for graduate students. Dr. Petersen says every time she teaches the seminar she finds a project that enables students to apply their research and counseling skills to the project. The project has to be for a unit that is nonprofit. "We find a research question that is meaningful to the agency or unit that my students would be able to work with and do," she states. Dr. Petersen has always been fond of the library. She approached the library to find out the library's interests. Dr. Petersen told the library that she could bring a public relations agency approach to helping resolve a particular research issue. Dr. Petersen says that she was interested in the change in the mission of the university as a whole. USF was originally founded as a teaching university. Now USF is focusing on being a major metropolitan research university. Dr. Petersen says it seemed that the USF library was going to have to consider what research means to it. "It's not just the number of books you have. It is the entire relationship with your research faculty," she states. Dr. Petersen started to look at what kind of communication there was on an organizational level between the library and research professors. Dr. Petersen and her graduate class conducted an opinion survey of both research faculty and faculty librarians who would interact with the professors. The

survey focused on major communication issues of the relationship between the faculty librarians and the research professors. Dr. Petersen and her class wanted to find out what would ultimately lead the library to become a research centered library capable of achieving ARL membership, which is membership at the highest standards nationwide. Dr. Petersen figured out that there was not a strong organizational level relationship. Dr. Petersen and her class gave seven recommendations that needed to be established in order to start an organizational level relationship. The dean of the library, Ms. Perez, wanted to use the report and figure out how to improve the relationship.

Dr. Petersen is asked to assist the library regularly

Dean Perez bought Dr. Petersen out of a course each semester. The director in the School of Mass Communications had to find someone to teach a course in the fall and spring. Dean Perez provided Dr. Petersen with a research assistant who was in the graduate seminar class that worked on the library project. Dr. Petersen's job was to implement the recommendations. One recommendation was further research. Dr. Petersen and her assistant went to 900 research faculty members and asked them what they needed at the library to help them be a research professor. Dr. Petersen found that many did not think they were a research professor. Also, Dr. Petersen was supposed to get to know more about the individuals at the library. She formed a communication task force that was going to further the recommendations made in the study about improving organizational level communication. The task force was small. The force worked with others to get their opinions. Also, Dr. Petersen believed the section of the library website directed to research faculty needed to be enhanced. "Many necessary changes needed to be made with the overall appearance of the website and the overall ease of obtaining information," states Dr. Petersen. She conducted group research with professional librarians to find out what needed to be done to get the library to move from its teaching roots to the research mentality. "It was a brainstorming team. None of this would have been possible without Dean Perez saying yes this was needed, and yes we are willing to implement this," states Dr. Petersen. My year as consultant followed by the research project I think has opened up a lot of avenues," she states.

Where do you see the future of CIS

Dr. Petersen sees the future of CIS as a digital one. "The building is obsolete. Our studios are analog. It is very expensive to convert to digital. We have to find the money because the university is not funding it. We are in a huge media market so we do get a lot of support from the professional media organization in the Tampa Bay area," Dr. Petersen states. She says converting to digital will be a major renovation. The CIS building has two TV studios. The smaller studio is being converted piece by piece to digital. When the School of Mass Communications moved into the CIS building, radio broadcasting was a major issue. Dr. Petersen says the needs for radio labs and for someone to teach in the labs have diminished over the years to the point that there are no longer radio labs. The radio labs are now TV editing rooms. "Physical renovations to the building reflect the technology. Our building has become obsolete in a sense. We are working hard to try and bring it back up to standards," states Dr. Petersen.

Faculty changes in the School of Mass Communications

Dr. Petersen says the insertion of theory into the undergraduate program has changed the faculty. She says there are more faculty members now and more with Ph.D.'s. She used to be the only one teaching in the graduate public relations program. Dr. Petersen says they have hired a wonderful theorist and researcher since then. "Our program is getting national attention because of what all of us do in terms of teaching our students the why behind the what," she states. Dr. Petersen says students receive critical thinking skills.

Media convergence and its affects on the School of Mass Communications

"We are gearing up our program with convergence type of courses. That is a huge difference. On the one hand specialization of our tracks helps students to focus on their particular field of study, but I do not like seeing that because it is too narrowly focused," she states. Dr. Petersen says she brings together the four major mass mediums in her Communications Law class. "They need to have more understanding of other aspects of mass communications," she says. Dr. Petersen has her class look at laws or rulings from different perspectives, such as from a newspaper perspective to a television perspective. Dr. Petersen says there have been thoughts nationwide that the mass communications programs are too specific and need to have core courses where students from different tracks interact. "Convergence is not just with media, but also with type of education we give our students," she says.

Has USF's focus on research affected the School of Mass Communications?

Dr. Petersen says USF's research focus has had implications for everyone. Mass Communications has begun the process of furthering the university's mission by hiring research professors and making sure the accreditation committees are satisfied not just with the school's practical training, but also with the school's scholarship.

Final words of Dr. Petersen

Dr. Petersen says many students have commented about her. Some students have said that Dr. Petersen believed in them and made them better than they ever thought they could be. Some students say Dr. Petersen is hard but worthwhile. "I expect 200 percent from the students, but I give 200 percent to them. I'm right there with them doing the work. My undergraduates in Communications Law have told me that they came in afraid of the topic, not liking it, but ended up seeing how much better they understood just their daily living," states Dr. Petersen. Other students have told Dr. Petersen that they have never learned so much or been so challenged to do their best. "I would like to be remembered as someone who made a difference in their lives and helped them to achieve their potential. I like to work with students to find their strengths and work with those, but also help them to improve their weaknesses," she states. Students have told Dr. Petersen that she is tough, but fair. "Education is so important to me. I'm first generation American," she says. Her parents emigrated from Eastern Europe before Hitler took over their area. She is the only one in her immediate family to have gone to college, much less have an advanced degree. One person told Dr. Petersen that she was born to this. Dr. Petersen thinks the person may be right. "I can't see myself doing anything else," she says.

End of Interview