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Ona Riggin oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, August 15, 2003

Ona Riggin (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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Current Position: Emeritus and
Distinguished Professor
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Riggin came to USF in 1977 as a professor and director of special projects in the College of Nursing.

During her career Dr. Riggin chaired the graduate council, research council, and honor and awards council.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Riggin to USF

She arrived in the fall of 1977. She taught at UT. Her husband, Dr. John Riggin, accepted the position of chief of staff at the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital. They moved to Tampa and she accepted the position at the College of Nursing.

What did the USF campus look like in 1977?

“It was a skeleton of what it is today.” When Dr. Riggin first arrived, she began working at the Health Sciences Center. At that point the Health Sciences Center consisted of the College of Nursing building, the College of Medicine building, and the library. “Since that time, many buildings have been added there.”

When and how did the College of Nursing begin?

“The College of Nursing has a very interesting history.” In 1965 the legislature approved funds and legislation for the establishment of the College of Nursing. In 1968 the first dean, Dr. Alice Keefe, was appointed. She served for less than a year. Then Gwendoline MacDonald was appointed dean in 1969. In 1970 she employed nine charter faculty. In 1973 they admitted the first class of bachelor students, which consisted of fifty students. The first class graduated in 1975. In 1977 the College of Nursing added R.N. to the B.S. program. “It [College of Nursing] had a rapid transition from the time money was appropriated, the proposal for the college was written, and [it] graduated the first class.”

Where was the College of Nursing first located?

The College of Nursing started in trailers. They did not move into a building until 1975. For the first two years, students were in trailers.

Courses students take before entering the nursing program

Nursing is an upper division baccalaureate degree. Students spend the first two years of college either on a four-year campus or an associate degree or two-year campus. In their first two years, students take courses that fulfill requirements for the typical undergraduate student. Also, in the first two years students take base courses in order to begin professional work.

After being admitted into the College of Nursing

Once they are admitted to the College of Nursing, they have a combination of theory and clinical work. Usually they serve in the clinical area for fifteen to twenty hours a week. "It is a very rigorous curriculum because they have a number of theory courses, which are really demanding. They have to make the transition from being a lay person to being a professional person. It is a tall order."

Why was Dr. Riggin hired?

They needed someone who could counsel and advise students. They also needed someone who was qualified and could do a feasibility study for the Master of Science degree program. They needed someone who could write the proposal, which Dr. Riggin did.

Diversity of students

In the early days, Dr. Riggins says nursing was predominantly a female major. However, they did have some men. They had black students. In the master's program, there was less diversity. The first class of master's students was entirely white. In the second class there was one male. "Since that time, we have a pretty good mix of male, black, Hispanic, and white students." They have had some Asian students as well.

College of Medicine and the College of Nursing's relationship

They were separate institutions. However, there was a cooperative relationship between the College of Nursing and the College of Medicine. For example, in the master's program, a number of the chairs and faculty from the College of Medicine taught courses in the early nursing master's program.

Early faculty members

Dr. Imogene King was an early faculty member in the College of Nursing. She was well known for theory development. She taught research courses and carried a heavy thesis load.

Faculty members carry a heavy thesis load

Dr. Riggin says they all carried a heavy thesis load because in the early days of the program students were required to do a thesis. They served on ten or more thesis committees. She chaired fifty thesis committees.

Early challenges of the College of Nursing

She says one of the major challenges was accruing a sufficient number of faculty. That was a multi-faceted problem because in the early days there were not many prepared

nurse educators in the country. Many times seasoned people are not eager to come to a relatively new program, which the program at USF was at the time. Funding, which continues to be a problem, was a problem at the time. Sometimes they received applicants from people they could employ but did not have the funds to employ them. Nationally, in order to maintain accreditation, one really had to have faculty who were prepared at the doctorate level. From 1980 to 1985, there were thirteen faculty members who were working on doctoral degrees, and who were part-time faculty. "It was a fairly difficult period of time."

How did the College of Nursing attract faculty?

There were many ways that happened. One, Gwendoline MacDonald had been the president of the National League for Nursing. That position enabled her to have had wide exposure nationally. "Also, as one brings on more faculty you know people in your specialty area and you begin to tell them about all of the advantages here." She says as they talked about USF and the College of Nursing they became so enthusiastic that the potential faculty members also became enthusiastic. Dr. Riggins says some of the people who came for an interview just fell in love with the college, the faculty, and the university.

How was the College of Nursing funded in the early days?

Within a university there is the budget for the main campus. Health sciences had its own budget. In the early days the vice president for health sciences was also the dean of the College of Medicine. Funding was really negotiated between that individual and the dean of the College of Nursing. Dr. Riggins says they went through a period of time with only a vice president for health sciences and a separate dean for the College of Medicine. She says about ten years ago it again reversed. Now there is a vice president for health sciences who is also the dean of the College of Medicine. Since that time, they have added the College of Public Health, so it has become a much more collaborative operation within the Health Sciences then when the two colleges, of nursing and medicine, dealt one on one with each other.

USF support of the College of Nursing

She says the USF community was quite supportive. She served on numerous committees on the main campus. Everyone on campus was really very open and eager to have us as a part of the government structure.

Dr. Riggins becomes assistant dean for graduate education and research.

The Master of Science degree program begins

The BOR approved the proposal in 1979. The program is a master's of science degree with a major in nursing. The College of Nursing admitted the first class of students, consisting of sixteen students, in 1980. In the beginning, there were three faculty members that began the master's program.

Specialty areas added to the master's program

When Dr. Riggin wrote the proposal, she had a lot of consultation. The proposal contained only one focus area because of restricted faculty and funding. Based on the feasibility study the area of focus needed to be adult health nursing. Then the College of Nursing was able to add concentrations, or specialty areas, to the curriculum without having to get state graduate council or the BOR's permission. In 1982 the College of Nursing added the gerontological program to the master's degree. This new addition was the result of federal funding from the department of advanced nurse training. In 1984 they added the specialty area in psychiatric mental health nursing. In 1986 they added community health nursing and oncology nursing. In 1988 they added a family health nursing concentration, which was under a nurse training grant from the federal government.

Why was it important for the College of Nursing to have a M.S. degree?

Dr. Riggin says specialized knowledge becomes very important. "You need individuals who have specialty training. It's somewhat akin to the specialty areas in medicine. That's why it was necessary to add the various concentrations. Also, you have baccalaureate graduates who have been working in the field and are particularly interested in these different areas."

One reason why students entered the master's program at USF

USF had the only master's program in nursing in the area. UF and UM had master's programs as well.

The number of students increases in the master's program

In 1980 the College of Nursing admitted sixteen students into the master's program. In 1983, when the National League accredited the program for nursing, they had 140 students.

She became chairperson for the graduate program in psychiatric mental health nursing.

The psychiatric mental health nursing program becomes well known nationally

Her specialty is psychiatric mental health nursing. Since the program had grown so rapidly they needed someone to administer that particular concentration and to help it develop, because nationally, a very small percent of nurses enter psychiatric mental health nursing. She chaired the program from then until she retired. It became one of the better known psych mental health programs in the country. At one time, the program had more students than some of the large universities. Also, the Air Force and the Navy approved the program. Both branches of the armed forces sent students to USF to complete their master's degrees.

The difference between the curriculum of the baccalaureate degree program and the master's degree program

At the baccalaureate level, the curriculum is a prescribed curriculum. A student enters the program and goes through the entire program in a lock step manner, which is not different from many professional programs. The master's program is quite different.

Students do have a core curriculum, which contains course on theory, research, pathophysiology, pharmacology, and physical assessment. After students complete the core courses they have prescribed courses in terms of a student's specialty. Master's students also have the option to take electives in other specialties or in the university. They have a number of students who will do a dual major. For example, in psychiatric mental health nursing, a number of students also complete the family health or adult health concentrations.

The number of credits in the master's program

When the master's degree program first began, it was a forty-eight credit program. Then, due to trends in the country and changes in the university, they reduced the program to thirty-six credits. However, everyone soon realized that thirty-six credits were not enough. Today, the program is around forty-four or forty-five credits.

Ph.D. program in nursing

In 1970 the College of Nursing started the Ph.D. program in nursing. The college admitted seven students in the first year. Since that time, the college continues to admit seven or eight students each year. In 2001 the college started the baccalaureate to Ph.D. program. At the time, four students were admitted to the program. Dr. Riggin says this program admits fewer students because each student receives financial support throughout their doctoral study. Each student receives 20,000 dollars a year. They are full-time, either clinically or class wise. "It is a very rigorous schedule that they have. It is a wonderful way to earn a doctoral degree especially if you're moving from the baccalaureate level into the Ph.D. level."

In 1990 she became the director for the development grant in alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

The USF College of Nursing focuses on helping people who have substance abuse problems

The USF College of Nursing was one of seven nursing colleges in the entire country to receive money for the development grant in alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. The major purpose of the grant was to prepare faculty in the area of substance abuse and other drugs. Faculty worked with substance abuse specialists in the local area. Through research focuses, each faculty member developed a specialty area in substance abuse. Two faculty members worked in the area of pediatrics; one worked in the area of gerontological nursing; two worked in the area of adult health, and two worked in the area of maternal child.

Present challenges for the College of Nursing

"The major challenge is prepared faculty shortages. This is a dire problem throughout the country."

Dean of the College of Nursing

Dr. Patricia Burns was appointed dean in 1997. "She is a very innovative dean who has done many things to advance the College of Nursing." Currently, Dr. Burns is focusing

on employing a number of master's degree graduates who work primarily with the undergraduate students in clinical areas. They also serve some graduate students.

What was the early vision of the College of Nursing, and has it changed?

“The vision was always to prepare top-notch nurse graduates at the various levels. That was always the vision.” Dr. Riggin says the vision has changed through curriculum and educational changes. For example, in 2001 the college established five clinical cooperatives, a cross between diploma nursing and baccalaureate nursing. Once a student is admitted to the College of Nursing, he or she can elect a clinical hospital or group to be involved with for the entire program. One of the clinical cooperatives is a combination of the Veterans Administration Hospital, the Shriners Hospital, and the Moffitt Cancer Center. A student remains with the same faculty and clinical people during that time.

Capping of undergraduate nursing students

The College of Nursing was always capped at sixty baccalaureate students. The reason for the initial cap was a legislative action applicable to all baccalaureate programs in nursing in Florida. In 2001, that was lifted and immediately the college started admitting sixty students two times a year. The College of Nursing admits 120 students each year. Dr. Riggin says the reason for the lifting of the cap is to help meet the severe nursing that exists in the U.S.

Where are nursing students from?

Predominantly, nursing students are from the state of Florida. Master's students are from around the country. “We do give priority to Florida students.” If out of state students meet the criteria for admission into the master's program they are accepted.

The number of undergraduate applicants

In 2003 there were 500 applicants for the baccalaureate program. The college cut off the admission GPA to 3.4.

Where does Dr. Riggin see the College of Nursing in ten years?

She sees it continuing to grow. She also sees new buildings for the College of Nursing.

A new College of Nursing building will provide more space for classrooms and research

In September of 2003, there will be a groundbreaking for the new College of Nursing building. The new building will provide additional classroom space, and most importantly, it will provide space for research. At the present time, faculty do not have space for research in the current building. “We are very crowded.”

Research becomes more important to the College of Nursing

In 1990 the dean at the time, Judith A. Plawicki, established the Office of Research. Dr. Riggin says the establishment of the Office of Research was really the first time the College of Nursing providing support to faculty members to conduct research. Since Dr. Burns has become dean, the college now has the Center for Research, and an associate dean for doctoral education in research. The college improved research funding by

eighty-three percent. “It [research] is a very important part of the growth of the college.” She says nationally there is an emphasis on prepared doctoral faculty doing research.

Specific research in the College of Nursing

Substance abuse is one area where a good amount of research has occurred. Dr. Theresa Beckie just received a major grant in the area of cardiovascular nursing, with an emphasis on the rehabilitation of women who have had cardiac problems. Dr. Evans, the associate dean for research, has a very strong research base in children in adolescence. She has done a good amount of service type research. Other faculty members in the college are engaged in oncology research. These faculty members especially focus on breast cancer research. Susan McMillan is the college’s big oncology researcher.

Dr. Burn’s vision of the College of Nursing

Dr. Riggin says Dr. Burn’s vision “is once of excellence.” “She looks at producing the very best nurses at each of the levels. She is very involved in the advancement of the college in every area.”

The College of Health Science, the College of Nursing, and the College of Medicine work together

Dr. Daugherty was appointed the vice president for health sciences around 2000. One of his major missions has been to bring the three colleges together, and get them to work together and work with the various health institutes in the community as well as with USF. Dr. Riggin says there have been numerous meetings and committees to look at ways this can occur. She says now more than ever there is a strong emphasis of everyone working together. She thinks the colleges are moving back to things they did in the early days such as medical and nursing students learning together, and nursing faculty teaching some of the medical classes and vice a versa.

What is Dr. Riggin most proud of in her history at USF?

She is very proud of the university and the College of Nursing. “As far as the college is concerned, I am most proud of the advances that have been made in the college in terms of increasing the number of programs.”

Last words that Dr. Riggin would like to leave behind about USF

“I would tell them it’s [USF] a great place to work. I think there are wonderful opportunities here.” She says there are “very collegial relationships both on the main campus and on the health science campus. Also, USF provides “a very supportive atmosphere and environment.” “You are able to really help yourself advanced and meet your own expectations and then to work cooperatively to help the [different] colleges develop.”

End of Interview