

8-4-2003

David Schenck oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, August 4, 2003

David Schenck (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhistinfo_oh



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Education Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Schenck, David (Interviewee) and Greenberg, Yael V. (Interviewer), "David Schenck oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, August 4, 2003" (2003). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 172.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhistinfo_oh/172

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Historical University Archives at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

**Copyright, 2008, University of South Florida.
All rights, reserved.**

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.

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

Narrator: Dr. David P. Schenck
Current Position: Professor of Biomedical
Ethics and Literature
Date of Interview: April 8, 2003
Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date of Edit: October 27, 2003

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg
Location of Interview: Tampa
Campus Library
Abstractor: Mary E. Yeary
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

He came to USF in the fall of 1974 as an assistant professor of French in the Division of Modern Languages.

Circumstances that brought him here

He came to USF in the fall of 1974 after responding to a position announcement for French. At the time, Dr. Schenck was teaching at a small liberal arts college in North Carolina. The USF position seemed like an interesting opportunity.

Where was the job ad to which Dr. Schenck responded

The advertisement was in the Chronicle of Higher Education.

Why did he decide to come to USF?

Before coming to USF, Dr. Schenck was teaching at St. Andrews College in North Carolina. The college had 650 students. He taught French courses and a course in western civilization. He says it was a wonderful experience. But, the college was in desperate financial trouble. He and his wife were both on the faculty there. In the third year they were at the college the faculty was cut from sixty-five to fifty members. They were not cut, but he was getting nervous. He decided to answer that advertisement. He came down to USF and liked what he saw in terms of the academic programs. He thought he would have a better opportunity to do more research in French literature than he had at St. Andrews. He also wanted to teach graduate students, which he could not do at St. Andrews.

How did USF differ from St. Andrews College?

“Much more was demanded of the faculty in a small college atmosphere. You were part of an extended community. You were expected to be part of the community and the college life. Students had greater access to you than they do here. A lot of learning went on outside of the classroom. You would have students at your house on evenings or weekends for various things. It was much more intense, and a lot less specialized,” he states.

Did Dr. Schenck think he would stay at USF for twenty-nine years?

He came thinking he would stay three or four years and then go somewhere else. “The university has been very good to me. And I kept getting offered new opportunities. Every couple of years something new came along, so I haven’t been bored,” states Dr. Schenck.

What did USF and the surrounding area look like in 1974?

“It looked seedy. It was an open field with sandspurs. The largest building on campus was the old library. USF was a rather inhospitable looking place. Fowler was very barren. It was not a very inviting-looking place. USF has changed a lot. USF’s architectures have done a lot with the place. It is like night and day,” states Dr. Schenck.

Were there a lot of other professors in his department in 1974 teaching different languages?

Dr. Schenck says there were a lot of other professors teaching different languages. At the time, the languages included Spanish, French, Italian, German, Russian, and sometimes Hebrew, Modern Greek, or Japanese.

Dr. Schenck comments on the tensions in the department

Dr. Schenck says the department was really troubled. There was a great deal of strife. He was very disillusioned and found himself caught up in the politics. The tension in the department was one of the reasons Dr. Schenck became involved in planning the honors program.

Dr. Schenck becomes full professor

At USF, he went from assistant to associate to full professor over a number of years.

Dr. Schenck is approached about starting an honors program at USF

In 1980, Bill Scheurle, who was then dean of undergraduate studies, came to Dr. Schenck and asked him how he felt about honors. Dr. Schenck responded that he felt very good about honors. He was then asked to be the new director of honors. Dr. Schenck responded saying that USF does not have an honors program. Bill Scheurle then told him he was going to build it. Dr. Schenck accepted the position because it was an interesting challenge.

The reasons for establishing an honors program

“There had been some attempts to establish an honors program in the past. They would last three or four years and then fizzle out. This was because there was no central financial commitment to it. Bill Scheurle had decided that this was something USF had to do and put a financial commitment behind it,” states Dr. Schenck.

Why was USF so interested in starting an honors program at a new university?

“We wanted to reward really bright students. The university felt that it was not challenging bright students quite enough. They needed to offer something a bit more challenging. Also, it was a good recruiting tool. USF, until the last ten years or so, never

recruited students. Students came to us. Eventually we realized that this was good for only so long. We realized we needed to start recruiting. It was a way to get good students and to get USF's name out there," states Dr. Schenck.

Why did Dr. Schenck want to be involved in the planning of an honors program

One of the reasons he jumped at the chance to do the honors program was because it was opportunity to do something that was constructive as opposed to being involved in the strife that was taking place in the language department. He thought the department was not doing much for the university. The opportunity to be involved in the honors program was an opportunity to do something for the university. He saw it as a real opportunity and an option for growth on different levels.

USF's honors program begins

Planning for the program began in 1980. He worked for about six to nine months with a small committee that had been appointed as the honors committee. This committee did a study of the different honors programs around the country. They tried to come up with a program that was unique to USF and one that would fit the university and take advantage of its strengths. Then they came up with the University Honors Program as it is today. The program began in 1982. He headed it for five years.

What were the first honors students like and why did they become interested in joining the program?

He remembers a lot of them being interested in medicine. Ultimately, Dr. Schenck and Dr. Shirley wanted to link the program with the USF College of Medicine. The honors program decided to tell students that if they joined the honors program, the program would guarantee so many of the students spots in the USF College of Medicine's freshmen class. So a lot of the students were interested in pre-med. A number of students were interested in engineering. Most of the students had ambitions to go on to graduate schools or professional schools.

What programs for the honors program did Dr. Schenck initiate and how did he structure it since it was a new idea at USF?

The honors committee, which consisted of six faculty members, looked nationwide at what other honors programs were doing. He also joined the National Collegiate Honors Council, which has a convention every year. The council not only has faculty members but it also has many students involved with it. He picked up a lot of ideas, brought them back, and talked about them with the committee. They came up with the basic format, which he believes still exists today. They decided to have four one semester required courses in Arts and Sciences, Behavioral Sciences, Natural Sciences, Fine Arts, and so forth. They started off with a course called Acquisition of Knowledge. This course was about asking the questions how do we know, how do we know what we know, what are the ways of knowing, and what are the various approaches to getting information from the world.

How did Dr. Schenck attract students to the honors program?

He went out recruiting students. He went to the Office of Records and Registration and asked for a list of all the students who were high achievers and have applied to USF. The honors committee decided to look at students in the realm of a 1200 SAT score and a minimum of a 3.5 high school graduating GPA. He wrote to these students and told them about the new program. He asked them if they would like to join and offered them a book scholarship. They got responses. The program started off with fifty students that year. Now there are 1200 students in the program.

Dr. Schenck is asked to be involved with academic affairs

In 1987, he was asked to come in to academic affairs. He came in as an assistant provost, and then became acting vice provost, and then again he became assistant provost. Dr. Schenck says he learned a lot as acting vice provost. He says there were some wonderful people in academic affairs that taught him a lot. He was challenged. He was asked to be an assistant to the provost because the provost's workload was mushrooming.

What does Dr. Schenck do as assistant provost?

As the assistant provost, Dr. Schenck did things relative to state program review and program development. Also, he monitored the progress of USF in terms of hiring women and minorities. It was his job to look over the shoulder of the deans and department chairs of the various colleges and make sure they were looking as hard as they could to have the right representation of minorities. If they were not then they could not make hires. Dr. Schenck says this did not happen very often. Also, as assistant provost, he occasionally had to deal with unfortunate faculty situations. A colleague of Dr. Schenck, who was in the Division of Modern Languages, was an alcoholic. This became problematic. Dr. Schenck was asked to be the liaison between this person and his or her therapist. Until such progress was made, the colleague could not come back to the campus. He says this was difficult because it was someone he knew well. He worked in academic affairs until 1989. Then he was offered another position.

Why did Dr. Schenck want to go in to academic affairs

He saw it as a new challenge. He thought that he could possibly make a new contribution. A certain part of him did not want to leave honors because he was having a great time with it. He saw the first class through until they graduated. He thought well, if I'm going to make a change, now is the time to do it.

Dr. Schenck is asked to be the interim dean at the Sarasota campus

In 1989, Dr. Meisels, the new provost at the time, asked Dr. Schenck if he would go down and serve as the interim dean and executive officer at the Sarasota campus. He did that. Dr. Schenck thought he would come back to Tampa in a year or so when the Sarasota campus hired a new dean. However, he found the job more interesting than he expected it to be. He ended up with the permanent position. The first year as dean he spent eighty to ninety percent of his time on people problems. He came to feel that dealing with people problems was what most university administration positions entailed. He was dean of the Sarasota campus from 1990 to 1998. He then got burned out after all the years of administration. He asked to be replaced.

How did the Sarasota campus differ from the Tampa campus?

“In Sarasota there were no lower level students, only upper level and graduate students. It is a much smaller program. It had an older population. The average age of students when I was there was twenty-six. Many of the students had raised their own children and were coming back to college to finish undergraduate degrees. They were more mature and more goal oriented,” states Dr. Schenck.

Dr. Schenck discusses USF’s merge with New College

New College is located in Sarasota. At the time, the college was part of USF. Dr. Schenck says USF and New College had never had a happy marriage. New College was completely bankrupt at the time, and wanted to merge with USF in order to survive. Dr. Schenck says New College resented its president who had decided that the college needed to merge with USF. Dr. Schenck says the college thought the president had sold them out. Dr. Schenck says New College resented USF for taking it over. Dr. Schenck says it was a rough time dealing with New College. He says the students of New College tried to make his life difficult. Dr. Schenck says the students liked to party in the early hours of the morning. At one point he had to serve as an intermediary between the local community and the police force and with the students.

Dr. Schenck discusses the separation of New College and USF

He thinks the separation eventually of New College and USF was good for USF. He says that New College’s financial situation is worse now since separating from USF. He believes that New College was a liability for USF.

Dr. Schenck’s opinion on USF’s regional campuses

He also thinks regional campuses are liabilities. He thinks it is an enormous financial strain on USF to have regional campuses.

After being dean of the Sarasota campus, Dr. Schenck develops a new career in biomedical ethics and heads to Georgetown University to study the subject

After being replaced as dean of the Sarasota campus, Dr. Schenck told the USF provost that he wanted to develop a new career. About the time he got involved with the USF honors program, he got passionately interested in biomedical ethics. He had not taken any sabbatical or development leave in all the time that he had been at USF. The provost told him he was entitled to a year’s leave of absence. Dr. Schenck went to Georgetown University. He had been there a number of times before to take courses in biomedical ethics. He went back to Georgetown and spent the academic year of 1998 to 1999 there. While at Georgetown Dr. Schenck began visiting hospitals and clinics. He apprenticed himself to the neonatologists. Dr. Schenck says the neonatology unit at Georgetown is very good. He also says the unit runs into ethical problems all of the time. He spent time learning about the ethical issues. At Georgetown he created his own program of study and research.

After leaving Georgetown, Dr. Schenck came back to USF and began his career in biomedical ethics at USF’s Ethics Center

He came back to USF and went to work in the ethics center, which was attached to the Philosophy Department at that time. Dr. Peter French was the director of the center and the chairman of the Department of Philosophy. Dr. French asked him to come and work at the ethics center. Dr. Schenck's primary responsibility was to teach bio medical ethics. Dr. French left USF in 2000 to go to Arizona State University. Dr. Schenck was asked if he would take over the directorship of the center.

About the Ethics Center

The Ethics Center first started in St. Petersburg in 1990. The center was originally designed to deal with general ethical theory, and business and journalism ethics. Dr. Schenck says slowly the center began to add interest in bio medical ethics. When the center moved to USF a lot of the bio medical ethics stuff was handed off to Dr. Schenck. He then began offering courses in bio ethics. The ethics center was not just about bio medical ethics. Sports ethics and development ethics were also taught.

Why did USF want an ethics center?

Dr. Schenck believes that USF wanted to have an ethics center because ethics involves very compelling issues. Also, he believes a center was desired because there was only a small piece of bio medical ethics being taught in the College of Medicine. It was limited to one section of a course in a first year medical course.

A new master's program in bio medical ethics begins fall 2003

Since then there is a new master's program that will start in the fall semester of 2003. The program is called a Master's in Biomedical Ethics and Medical Humanities. It is housed at the College of Medicine, but anyone can enter the program, not just medical students.

Why did the USF Ethics Center have to be dissolved in 2001?

Dr. Schenck says at the time the university had a five percent budget cut. The dean of Arts and Sciences had to make up a huge budget cut. At the same time the state mandated the universities not to cut into FTE production when they made the cuts. Dr. Schenck says this meant that the universities have to do the same with less. The ethics center did not generate FTE's. The courses he taught had philosophy numbers, so philosophy would get the credit. The dean had to eliminate anything that she could that would not cut into FTE production.

Dr. Schenck's thoughts about the ethics center being dissolved

"I think it is a mistake that the main campus has basically said that we cannot afford to do bioethics. I do not fault the dean at all," he states. Dr. Schenck thinks that it was a mistake that alternative ways were not found in order to keep an ethics center. He was the director of the center for a year until the current dean had to close the Ethics Center and a number of other centers

What first interested Dr. Schenck in biomedical ethics?

Dr. Schenck says he had always been interested in medicine, not the practice so much as the issues. He ran into a bio-ethicist at Georgetown who was talking about narrative

ethics. Dr. Schenck had a background in literature so he became curious about narrative ethics. Dr. Schenck listened to a few of the bio-ethicist's lectures. Dr. Schenck then realized that he was a frustrated ethicist. Also, he had some difficult things happen to him personally. His dean at St. Andrews College had a wife who was dying of breast cancer. Dr. Schenck says the way the couple handled the situation inspired him. The dean eventually became a bio-ethicist. This helped to encourage Dr. Schenck in the area of biomedical ethics. Also, he has always been interested in how people respond to suffering and healing.

After the ethics center dissolved, Dr. Schenck became a faculty member in the English Department

After the dissolving of the ethics center, it was determined that he would go into the Department of Literature where he could teach literature and continue his interest in biomedical ethics. He teaches Great World Literature, which is an exit course. He teaches one or two sections of that per semester. He teaches two courses in bioethics. He teaches a biomedical ethics course in the Religious Studies Department and also he teaches a biomedical ethics course in the Honors Program.

Dr. Schenck's joint appointment with the USF Medical School

He has a joint appointment in the Department of Otolaryngology at the Medical School, where he is considered a quasi-member of the department. He is involved in their activities. Two mornings a week he is at the Medical School. He sees patients and goes to operating rooms. He also attends tumor board conferences, where members talk about current cases and look at charts. He is the Department of Otolaryngology's in-house ethicist. "They [department] get something out of it because they can bounce ideas off me. I'm a sounding board for them, and I have a non-medical approach to issues. So I give them a different perspective," states Dr. Schenck.

Where does Dr. Schenck see himself being in the future?

"Year after next I will have been at USF for thirty years. I will enter the drop program, stay the five years and then leave. I will have had enough after thirty-five years at USF. I will probably not cease doing things in bioethics. I would like to go somewhere else and teach part-time," he states.

Any last words that Dr. Schenck would like to leave behind?

"USF has been very good to me. I consider myself really lucky. All told, I think USF has treated me extremely well, and I am very grateful for that. When I leave there will always be a very special place in my heart for USF. Somehow people wanted to see to it that I had the opportunity to grow and develop and have opportunities to stretch. I would hope that institutions would do that. The other thing is a negative criticism. I don't think USF in general treats people very well. I have seen people who have fallen out of favor or have outlived their usefulness and the institution has a tendency to throw them away. Even if someone does something wrong, or makes a mistake, or is no longer so useful, but has made a significant contribution to the university, and toss them away is awful. That disappoints me," states Dr. Schenck.

End of Interview