

7-7-2003

Tennyson Wright oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 7, 2003

Tennyson J. Wright (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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Wright, Tennyson J. (Interviewee) and Greenberg, Yael V. (Interviewer), "Tennyson Wright oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 7, 2003" (2003). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 204.
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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

Narrator: Dr. Tennyson J. Wright (W)
Current Position: Former Vice-Provost of the
Department of Rehabilitation and Mental
Health Counseling
Audit Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date Audit Edit Completed: Dec. 1, 2003

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg (G)
Location of Interview: Tampa Campus
Library
Transcriber: University of Florida
Date of Interview: July 7, 2003
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Monday, July 7, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni, in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today we will be interviewing Dr. Tennyson Wright, who came to USF in 1985 as an associate professor in the Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling. In 1996, Dr. Wright was promoted to vice-provost and remained in the office for twelve years. Currently, in the fall of 2003, he will be returning to the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling. Good morning Dr. Wright.

W: Good morning.

G: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

W: I arrived in the spring of 1985, after being recruited as a faculty member in the Department of Rehabilitation Counseling. At that time, it was known as the Department of Rehabilitation and Counseling, and in later years, probably closer to the year 2000-

2001, the name was officially changed from the Department of Rehabilitation Counseling to the Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling.

G: Why did that name change occur?

W: The name changed to reflect the greater emphasis in mental health counseling. While we had always had emphasis to some extent, or at least program and class offerings in mental health, more of our students seemed to be pursuing the mental health licensure. Rather than suggesting it was the traditional rehabilitation counseling, we wanted the name to reflect the growing emphasis in mental health counseling as well. So the name really reflects the changing trends in student recruiting, student credentialing, and the mental health counseling market. That's really what we have today.

G: You mentioned that you were recruited to come here in 1985. Can you talk a little bit about that, and can you also tell me about the first time you saw the university campus?

W: Sure. I was recruited in the fall of 1984. [I] accepted a position and came in March of 1985, but I had had a long association with the state of Florida. I had worked at Florida State University from 1976-1978, and was very familiar with the state university system of Florida. I'd left Florida in 1978 and went into industry, and then moved back to Georgia [and] I was at the University of Georgia when I was recruited. My first visit to the campus was actually back in the summer of probably 1976 or 1977, when I came to the university to attend a workshop that was being sponsored by one of the departments here. It was probably in vocational evaluation that I attended a workshop in that area and got to know the campus a little bit. My wife and I were here. We stayed in one of the dorms. Then [they were] known as dorms, [but] now [they are called] residences. But

we stayed in one of the dorms, we played tennis across from the village area, and learned a little bit about the campus at that time. We did not officially return here until probably the fall of 1984, I think it was in November 1984, and then arrived here in March 1985. The campus had changed only slightly in those few years. I remember it as a large campus, but I didn't remember any distinctive features of the campus. When I say distinctive, there wasn't anything that just stood out. What did stand out, and maybe that is distinctive, is that all the buildings appeared to be rather pale, white, bland, [and] very conservative in structure. At that time, again back in 1985, it showed promise physically, and I'll talk a little bit about the academic promise later on. I also want to tell you that back in 1976, 1977, 1978, when I was at Florida State University as an assistant professor, the University of South Florida was the growing place. It was the institution that was getting all the attention, getting all the money, getting all the resources. At least we felt that [way]. We felt that we were getting cut out of the funding to some extent because all the growth was occurring at the University of South Florida. We kept wondering, where is this place, the University of South Florida, and what could possibly be in Tampa? In fact what was occurring was the funds were flowing to the University of South Florida, or at least that's what we felt and that's what we were told, [and] they weren't coming at the same level to us at Florida State at that time. Again, these were feelings that individuals had. So when there was someone or something to blame, it was well the money is going to the University of South Florida and that's why we aren't getting as much as we have in the past. Again, when I arrived here in 1985, I did not see anything particularly distinctive to reflect a major flow of funding. Nonetheless, it was

an interesting and exciting place, and that was one of the things that attracted me.

G: Do you think there was some resentment towards the University of South Florida?

Maybe resentment is not the right word, but [was there a] feeling that USF was getting more funding? Whether they were or were not we're not sure about. Do you think that FSU, the University of Florida, and other major institutions in the state of Florida were feeling some uneasiness about the university at the time?

W: It's hard to say, but I know that in the conversations that I was involved in in 1976, 1977, 1978, the feeling was, well we aren't getting what we think we should at Florida State because the money is going to the University of South Florida. There usually is resentment associated with the issue of equity. It was occurring then, it's still occurring today, and the issue of equity is one that is constantly on the table. I think the focus then, as we felt it and understood it, was that the flow of funds to the University of South Florida was in order to help it grow, help it respond to its mission and the demands for a higher education in this area. So I think it was probably a very good idea that the university system and the legislature was placing greater emphasis on building the University of South Florida.

G: Let's talk a little bit about your experiences as an associate professor. You came in 1985 in what was then called the Department of Rehabilitation and Counseling. Can you tell me about what you were hired to do, how your department was structured, and who was here at the time?

W: Sure. At the time I was recruited by the department chair, Dr. Calvin Pinkard. We know him as Cal. Cal is retired today, but still very active in the community and serves with us

occasionally. At that time the department consisted of Dr. Cal Pinkard as chair, Dr. Murray Landsman, Dr. Fred Dickman, Dr. Bill Emener, Dr. Pincus Gross, and Dr. John Rasch. Those were our core faculty members. The department back then, as you might imagine, was all white male. I was probably the first person of color to join the department in a faculty position on a full-time, tenure-earning basis. The department had been in place for about twenty years at that time. I think it was founded roughly in the early 1970s, maybe 1972 or thereabouts, so a little less than twenty years. Maybe it was 1965. But anyway, the department had a very strong core of faculty [and] had a very good reputation of producing master's level clinicians, therapists, rehabilitation practitioners. One of the features that stood out was that it had an emphasis in addictions counseling, [for example] alcohol [or] drug addiction, and that part of the program was headed by Dr. Fred Dickman. That was its real claim to fame during that time. I was recruited because the department had been successful in obtaining a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the office of post-secondary education, to recruit and train minorities to enter the rehabilitation counseling profession. At that time, there were few minorities in rehabilitation counseling. Dr. Pinkard was the PI of the grant out of Washington. I came in and I assumed responsibility for recruiting students and developing them, along with the other faculty members, and graduating and placing those students. I felt that I was very successful. In fact, I believe the program was very successful. We were able to recruit a number of minorities. I think we had about eight fellowships that we were able to award the students, [and] we also paid their tuition and fees and gave them a stipend every month. That was very attractive, [so] we were able to

recruit a lot of individuals locally as well as from around the Southeast. Eventually I assumed responsibility for that grant. In fact, I think we were probably in our first year when I came in, and by the time the grant was renewed three years later, I became the PI for the grant. I remained the PI through about 1992 or 1993. By that time I had left the department and joined the administration. But that was my area of emphasis and that was primarily what led me to come to the University of South Florida, again, because I was being recruited to head up the program on recruiting minorities into rehabilitation counseling.

G: Is the department still interested in recruiting minorities into the mental health profession? That's remained an emphasis?

W: It has remained an emphasis, although the funding isn't there any longer. The funding stopped around 1993-1994. We have no federal funding at this time, but there is still an emphasis and an interest in recruiting minorities and women into the profession.

Rehabilitation has traditionally been a white male dominated social service delivery profession. More and more women are entering the profession. In fact, about half of the students in our program are women, and more and more minorities or people of color, and that includes Asian, Latino, African American, and a few Native Americans, are entering the program. In fact, the president of the National Rehabilitation Association is an African-American male. So yes, the program continues to attract, recruit, and support minorities in rehabilitation.

G: In terms of faculty, the number of minority, persons of color, gender, has that changed in the department as well?

W: Yes it has. I mentioned that I was the first person of color, and certainly African-American male. I left the department in 1991, but I had been successful during the period that I was in the department in recruiting a number of students to the program. I had encouraged a number of them to continue beyond the master's to pursue the doctorate. One individual in particular took that advice after some delay, a couple years delay, but called one day to say, the question went like this: "Guess what, I've applied to a doctoral program at Southern Illinois University." That person happened to be Charlotte Griffin, who is now Dr. Charlotte Griffin Dixon. Charlotte went to Southern Illinois University, completed her doctorate, and when she was nearly finished, she called and said that she was interested in a job. Fortunately we were able to recruit her back to the University of South Florida. She came in, began her position as assistant professor tenure earning. She was tenured six years later, promoted to associate chair a year or two later, and today she is the department chair of the Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling. I consider that a major success story, but I also consider it a reflection of the changing times in higher education, specifically rehabilitation and mental health counseling. We've also been successful in recruiting a second person, who came just after Charlotte joined the department. Her name is Dr. Susan Kelley, who graduated from Florida State University, [and she is] a white female. Just this fall, fall of 2003, we will welcome our third woman into the department, and this individual is a Latina female. I don't know her name at this moment, I've forgotten it, but my point is, to answer your question, yes, the department has changed significantly. Not only do we now have four minorities, if you will, [but] three of those are women and very diverse. [We have a]

white female, African-American female, and Latina female, along with myself. So you might say that the department has shifted away from white males to a greater diversity, to reflect a greater diversity of people of color and women throughout and within the department. We still have three males, Dr. Bill Emener, who was the past chair and is a distinguished university professor, Dr. John Rasch. We have three white males and three women and one African-American male, so the department is very diverse today.

G: In terms of your responsibilities with recruitment and training of minorities into the program, were you teaching in addition to working on that grant?

W: Yes.

G: What kinds of courses were you teaching?

W: I was particularly focused on developing courses that would reflect the conditions of minorities with disabilities. I developed a four-sequence seminar on minorities with disabilities. What we looked at in those seminars, or focused on, were the conditions of people of color, minorities, with disabilities. We looked at the prevalence of disability, the geographical locations of those individuals, rural versus urban, language, [and] culture. We focused on how one intervened in making or helping to facilitate a successful rehabilitation of those individuals. Not only did we focus on training new students through those seminars, but we also focused on trying to integrate that knowledge and information into other courses in our standard sixty-hour course curriculum at that time so that students who weren't a part of the minority emphasis would also benefit from this information. Today it is much more widely dispersed throughout the curriculum than it was during the time that I was in the department on a

full-time basis.

G: I want to talk a little bit about your students for a minute. Why were people taking courses in rehab and counseling? Why were they interested? Was the university supportive of this program within the College of Arts and Sciences?

W: At that time the college was actually the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. That was the college that was headed by Dean Wallace Russell. The associate dean, or one of the associate deans at that time, was Dr. Bill Emener. The college was very supportive. From the dean's office up to the provost office, the university was very supportive. I remember when I came in and was recruited, Dr. Greg O'Brien was the provost. I was interviewed by Greg, Bill Emener, and another associate dean. Those individuals demonstrated to me a very strong support for me, [but] I think it was more than just a support for me, it was a support for what I could bring to the university and what was important to the university. I think what was important at that time was to attract strong talented people of color to the university and to help ensure that we achieved greater diversity at the University of South Florida. I think that my coming was clearly a statement of support by this university, and I think it was also a statement that recruiting students of color was important. For the department it was important because of the lack of minorities and women in rehabilitation counseling at that time. I think from a professional standpoint, the profession of rehabilitation, it was also a statement that an emphasis on training minorities was important. So again, as we look back, we see support at many levels, not just the college, not just the department, but also at the provost office level and then externally by the federal government and to some extent by

the state as well. The state office of vocational rehabilitation was very interested in this grant and extended its support as well. I think there was quite a bit of support for this program.

G: In comparison to other state universities, how does USF rate with attracting students and faculty of color? Are we above the curve, below the curve, or are we on par with the other universities?

W: I think today we are probably on par with other universities. We know that we have placed a lot of emphasis over the past few years on recruiting people of color, with a major emphasis on African Americans and Latinos, but we're also seeing a major recruitment extending to the Asian community. We're less successful in recruiting Native Americans, but nonetheless, the emphasis is on recruiting people of color. I think we're much more successful today than we were years ago, and I think that is a result of a number of things. One, a greater emphasis by way of hiring recruiters, financial support in terms of scholarships and fellowships and other forms of financial aid, institutionally communicating to counselors that this is a good place to be, and also the graduates of the university who are people of color have gone out and done extremely well in their respective disciplines. I think it's all a reflection of what the university has emphasized or refocused to emphasize over the last eight to ten years.

G: My final question before we move on to the administrative portion of your career, in terms of master's and Ph.D. degrees, when you came into the department was the department offering both an M.A. and a Ph.D.?

W: No, we have never offered the Ph. D. It's always been the MA in Rehabilitation and

Mental Health Counseling. No bachelor's degree and no Ph.D.

G: Is there a move by the department to have a Ph.D.?

W: I don't think so. I don't think that from a strategic planning direction that either the department or the college or the university would likely support a Ph.D. in Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling. The emphasis today is on programs in the natural and the physical sciences, medicine, public health, programs that have the ability to attract extramural funding, particularly federal funding, but also programs that respond to a particular need. Now that isn't to say that there isn't a particular need in rehabilitation and mental health counseling, there isn't a need necessarily for a Ph.D. in Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling, because I think that there probably is one. The question is, among the choices that one has to direct funding, what choices will one make? The university is going to be getting a program in social work to award a Ph.D. in social work and a Ph.D. in music. I offer those just as examples of programs where there is a need and suggest that while there may be a need in rehabilitation and mental health counseling, the direction at this time is not to start a new Ph.D. program. Perhaps in the future we will, but it takes a lot of resources, it takes a lot more faculty, and it takes doctoral credentialed faculty to grow such a program. I'm not sure that the university's willing at this time to put the support into the program.

G: When and why did you move to administration?

W: Well, for a number of reasons. Since I came to the university in 1985, I was always able to attract additional funding to support my efforts. I mentioned the grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration that I assumed responsibility for from Dr.

Pinkard, but I also was successful in attracting funding from the city of Tampa in the summer to assist youth in finding jobs. Each summer we placed about fifty young people in summer jobs throughout the university, and I was a PI of that grant. We were also able to provide them meals through another program so those that qualified had meals. They were placed throughout the university into offices, labs, [and] recreational programs. It provided them with work and it provided me with an income in the summer as well. I always taught in the summer, but it was very important for me to have a full-time, twelve month job not only teaching, but also doing research and doing service and administration. I have a family. My wife was in school at the University of South Florida. My wife and my daughter Tina were new to the area as well. My wife enrolled in the Department of Women's Studies, and she was a student there. My daughter was in a private school and had just begun the first grade. By 1991 she was in 7th or 8th grade and again, I needed full-time employment in the summer. I knew that it was important that I continued to support my family, but I also wanted to keep my hands in rehabilitation and administration. I was recruited to join the administration by the then Provost Jerry Meisels and Vice Provost John Hodgson. I was interviewed in the summer, I think it was probably May or June of 1991, just after I had received tenure. They invited me to come over and head up the office [and the] office's new emphasis on collective bargaining. I was assistant provost responsible for collective bargaining. Collective bargaining had been in the office of the general counsel, [but] at other universities around the state collective bargaining was in academic affairs. So the university decided that it was going to move collective bargaining responsibility for

managing, negotiating, grievances, advising the state university system, etc., out of the legal office of the general counsel, into academic affairs. Because it was a faculty matter, it was faculty collective bargaining. The United Faculty of Florida was the union that represented the faculty, and the university administration felt that it needed to be in academic affairs. So I was recruited to join the administration. Administration wasn't new to me. I had been an administrator in the department administering the grant and [was] responsible for the minority program. I had been an administrator at the University of Georgia, where I headed up the Upward Bound program and the Northeast Georgia Educational Opportunity Center. I had been an administrator in industry working for the sale company. I had been an administrator and lecturer at San Diego State University. So administration was not new to me. I had the opportunity to join the administration because it was an opportunity to assume a responsibility in a program, essentially labor relations, that I thought fit my interests, as well as my background.

G: Without getting into very specific and personal details, can you give me sort of an overview, if possible, of some of the kinds of issues that you were dealing with with regards to collective bargaining?

W: Sure. I mentioned that the United Faculty of Florida was the body representing the faculty at that time, and it still continues today. The contract in place was the collective bargaining between the United Faculty of Florida and the state university system, of which the University of South Florida is a part. [Of course] now the state university system is essentially gone away. The kinds of issues that we dealt with were issues that are all spelled out in the collective bargaining agreement, but such things as faculty

assignment, tenure and promotion, leaves of absence, every aspect of a faculty member's life Teaching, research, and service assignments, for example, are covered under the collective bargaining agreement. It spells out the rights and responsibilities not only of labor faculty, but also administration. It is essentially a contract and we were dealing with a legally binding contractual relationship, and I was the president's representative to the collective bargaining agreement during my early years in the provost office. I heard all grievances, I heard most disputes related to the collective bargaining agreement, [and] I was the step one reviewer. Step twos went to the state university system and then arbitration was heard by an arbitrator, but I was responsible for administering or managing those areas at that time.

G: Was that your primary responsibility in this particular position?

W: It was my primary responsibility. Secondarily though, I was responsible for working with the deans [and] working with chairs. [I was] always working with the president and provost in advising them on matters related to collective bargaining, helping them to answer questions regarding their rights and responsibilities, conducting training to ensure that they were up to par [and] knowledgeable, and helping them to resolve problems that they were facing. [But] I also continued my academic life. While I was in administration, one hundred percent of the time I had continuing responsibility to keep my professional skills up to date. So on top of what I was doing in administration, out of my own time I also continued to do research, write, and present at national, state, and local conferences. I continued to be active in the profession and I continued that right through 2003. Even though I'm one hundred percent administrator as vice-provost, I

continue to have an academic life and continue to keep active in the profession.

G: In 1996 you became vice-provost. How is that different from being an assistant provost, and did your duties change?

W: Sure. Again, in 1991 I was primarily the president's representative to the collective bargaining agreement, but over time I began to work closer and closer with Dr. John Hodgson. [I got involved] in other areas of academic administration. I became much, much more involved in compensation, negotiating the annual salary increase package [to] reflect the interest of the university, and communicating those to the group then known as the Collective Bargaining Advisory Committee (CBAC) in Tallahassee. [I was] working with the chancellor's office and communicating the needs of the university [and] the interests of the university in terms of what kind of funding was necessary and needed and desired to fund faculty salaries. So I got more involved in the compensation side. I also became more involved in the tenure and promotion side. Again, although tenure and promotion is a part of the collective bargaining agreement, there is the administration of the tenure and promotion process from the administration's side. [The administration was responsible for] making sure the faculty was up to speed and knowledgeable and [that] chairs and deans were up to speed in terms of what the criteria was for tenure and promotion. Then [there was] the application and making sure the application was processed properly and that there were no violations of the collective bargaining agreement with respect to the tenure and promotion process. [I was responsible for] making sure that the decisions were consistent with the collective bargaining agreement and tenure and promotion criteria and their procedures. I assisted the provost and the

vice-provost in advising them during those years, so from 1991-1996, I assumed greater and greater responsibility in those areas. Then when Dr. Meisels stepped down as provost and Dr. Hodgson stepped down as vice-provost, and an interim provost, Dr. Mike Kovak, who was then dean of engineering, came in, I was serving them as associate provost. Then under Dr. Tom Tighe, who became provost, I became vice-provost with greater responsibility for faculty affairs as opposed to just collective bargaining. Faculty affairs covers a much, much broader range of functions and areas of responsibility. Not only did I continue to have responsibility for collective bargaining through a faculty administrator who came on board, Dr. Mike Kovak, but I also assumed responsibility for supervising and managing the area dealing with space under Dr. Bernard Mackey, who reported to me. I also had a second person reporting to me, Mr. Denys Blell, who was responsible for diversity initiatives. So my portfolio grew from just collective bargaining to encompass a much broader area of administration in the office of the provost. There's a lot more detail, but that's how my portfolio changed and that's how it was different in 1996 as opposed to 1991.

G: In terms of diversity initiatives, what did the university charge you with doing in respect to diversity? Are they moving along in terms of major initiatives in this area of diversity?

W: I would say yes, [they are moving along in terms of major initiatives of diversity]. I mentioned that Mr. Denys Blell was the associate vice-president for diversity initiatives. The university hired Dennis around 1995-1996.

End of Interview

