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Dr. Harry W. Kendall oral history interview by Carl DuLac, May 10, 1977

Harry Kendall (Interviewee)

Carl DuLac (Interviewer)

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Carl DuLac: This interview is being conducted for Oral History, which is History 381. The project title is "Student-University Interaction and Influences on Student Life in Comparison with its Founding and Today." The narrator in this tape is Dr. Kendall. He is a professor of physics at the University of South Florida and one of its original charter members. The interviewer is Carl DuLac. It is being conducted in Dr. Kendall's office on May tenth.

Okay, what year did you join USF, and what was your position then and now?

Dr. H.W. Kendall: I was associate professor of physics in 1960, the first year we had any classes.

CD: And your position now?

HK: Now I'm professor of physics.

CD: And what degree or degrees do you have, and specifically from where?

HK: I have a Bachelor of Arts degree from (inaudible) College, a Master of Science degree from Florida State University and a Ph.D. degree from the University of Florida.

CD: How long after you finished college did you join USF?

HK: I joined USF in 1960, and I finished my bachelor's degree in 1948.

CD: Okay, what were some of the influences—general influences—of the students upon the early university? For example, did they help in organizing it, or any of its curricula?

HK: The first year we were in operation we had only freshmen; there were sixteen or eighteen hundred freshman. Everyone was teaching the freshman classes, and everyone was acting as advisors in terms of registration and discussing with students. The students played a very large part in the programs and the courses that were offered, and all the academic part of the curriculum foundation. They were not on committees, but the faculty that was here simply consulted them and discussed the sort of things going on. That is, those in the faculty that I knew—physics and geology and chemistry, biology and astronomy were all in the old Chemistry building at the present. And, therefore, there was a tremendous amount of interaction. Classes were in the same place. All that could be were there.

The courses were essentially all required that the students were taking, nearly all of them were. Except that starting year we did have a general physics, a general chemistry, and the beginning courses in each discipline. But we also had the science courses, which at that time were required of everyone. The student part in it was fairly large. Well, I think the students' role in forming the courses and curriculum of the university now is a large part of it. I don't see how a university can operate where students aren't involved.

CD: Okay, what were some of the influences of the university upon students? For many years—like, did they treat them as adults or children, or exactly how?

HK: Well, that's a personal opinion. I've always thought I treated all my students as adults.

CD: Well, I meant the majority of the university and its relationship, and what you thought of the whole university to the student.

HK: I just—in my viewpoint, I've always thought universities or colleges, anything, treats the student as an adult. And I think sometimes it surprises the student to know that he's thought of as an adult. It, sort of, means that the responsibilities of an adult go along with it. And I think some of them—particularly freshmen—are quite shocked by this attitude. But really, I don't believe we force them to do much. If they don't watch themselves they easily get behind. And what we assume—or the faculty generally assumes—they will do with those, they are adults.

CD: The effect of this, you know, treatment—would you say the students are more shocked today than they were years back, or how would you say?

HK: No, I think this really was more evident in the first years of the university because we do have a lot of local students and I don't think those students were quite ready for—as ready for a university atmosphere as they are now. I think they're much more preconditioned now, because we have so many graduates that live in the area that these people know. I think it was a little more fun teaching then than now for that reason.

CD: Okay. What would be any similarities or differences between USF and other universities, in the early years and today?

HK: Well, the thing that's most striking to me, and still today, is the fact that it is a commuter university. The other schools that I've been familiar with—Tallahassee and Gainesville and the schools in Tennessee—90 percent or more of the student body lived on campus. And this has a great deal of influence on what you can do. For example, academically—for example, at Gainesville, all tests and so forth were scheduled at night. We didn't have them in the daytime. This was a big shock when you come here, because all of a sudden you can't do that, because you can't ask the people to drive back, because 90 percent of them live a great distance away. This, by the way—in terms of you only gave three tests a quarter—adds another week to the quarter when you can give the tests at night.

That's the great difference, just that the students are—or most of them—are commuting students, and don't have, really, the same attitude toward the university as it being a replacement of home, a substitution for home. For them, home is still home and the university is a place to go for classes for the majority of our students. And real life is a—sort of, hard to take because they haven't done it. It's entirely different. I mean, it has some good points. The students are not here to cheer the football team or something. They're here to try to learn what you're trying to teach. That is their main objective. I think that this is not always the main objective in other places that are—you know, have more of what some people call a college atmosphere.

CD: Yeah. As for the atmosphere, how is the spirit of the early students? Were they really, you know, fired up, or enthused or—?

HK: I think those early students were really fired up. You just imagine the whole faculty concentrating all their time on freshmen courses. You can see how fired up they would get. Some of the freshmen were being taught everything that a professor will do. And now, I guess freshmen only see a small percent of the faculty, and seated in enormous size classes most of the time. Therefore, I think they were decidedly excited about the educational process itself. I know I used to surely enjoy it, and wish I could recapture the atmosphere that was present then.

Now, those professors that are rewarded for doing work are usually because they're doing graduate work of some kind, and they're really intermingling with only graduate students. And they are real good professors, and the graduate work is good. But it leaves the freshmen to really see only a small fraction of the faculty. No one is very anxious to teach tremendous-size lectures.

CD: So you'd say one of the major changes is the re-emphasis on specifically freshmen-type classes and now more towards research, or—?

HK: Well, it has to be at a university, or, at least, first it has to be. That's just what a university is supposed to do, as well as teach. It's to serve as a source of new information. If it doesn't perform that service, it's not living up to what the taxpayers are paying for. But it still makes a person who loves to teach sort of sad about it.

CD: So you feel like the students, kind of—you know, kind of, lost something because of this re-emphasis on research? They, kind of, lost out on something?

HK: Not—well, I don't know whether you would say they lost something or not.

CD: A drive—?

HK: As far as all the faculty members concentrating all their energies onto teaching, and teaching of freshman, that just no longer exists. There are people who devote themselves a good bit of the time to teaching freshmen courses, and I'm sure do an excellent job. But then when you sit down to talk with the other faculty members you're not going to have a conversation which involves, totally, the teaching of the freshmen course. You see how it's just going to change, the atmosphere. I'm not sure anything has been lost but it's different.

CD: Okay, what would you consider some other major changes over the years, and why they had to occur? And could you relate what they were due to—you know the deans, regents directing something, or anything of that nature?

HK: Well, I think one of the big changes at the university was the doing away with the College of Basic Studies. I'm not sure that this was good or bad. I won't condemn it or do the other, but I do say it did change things. Because all of the sudden, instead of having a fairly small number of required courses that the freshmen and sophomores were expected to take, now there's a multitude of courses for them to choose. Now, either way can be good, but as far as a change is concerned, that's the big, big change between—in this sort of criteria, in, uh—

CD: What do you think was the—some of the impact on the students? I mean, how did they feel about the change?

HK: I don't think that students really know what the change implies, because for the student to know what it implies, he would have to go through both curricula. Now when the change took place, those that went in one direction, they were familiar with that, and they either liked it or disliked it. Now after the change took place, the student either liked what is here now or doesn't like it. Since he didn't do both, there's very little opportunity for them to have a good opinion of it. And faculty, you found, were split at times, some very strongly for it, some very strongly against it.

CD: What do you think was the influence on the students when they changed semester systems to trimesters and then to quarters?

HK: In the change from semester to trimesters, the students I was mostly dealing with were not too happy with it for one very simple reason. We were trying to teach general physics, and what we ended up doing was trying to teach it with a fewer number of labs. No matter how many how many classes of it you had, it just made it harder. To switch to

a quarter system, we caught our numbers of labs for the whole course, and I think it runs a little more smoothly. Students are—generally because they've chosen a profession—are required to take physics and they're not very happy about it anyway. And therefore, (laughs) it's hard to say which one they liked the better, or the worse.

One personal student influence for one particular thing that I think was bad, and that's the getting away from final exams. During the Vietnam trouble students were protesting many things, and one of the things students desired to have changed was to do away with final exams. And this was done. And it's still done now. And I think that the student really loses something that he pays for. That is, the necessity of getting together of the material in a course in some kind of concise form so that he can take a final examination over that course. I think this is one of the things he wants to do in a course, and now he's not forced to, because he doesn't have to take a final exam. And people being like me—some people, maybe they don't do a lot of things they aren't forced to do. I think final exams are a real good teaching tool. Whether they're good grading tools or not doesn't make any difference. If you end up being able to teach something with a final exam, then it's (inaudible).

CD: Also, in the change between the trimester and quarter system, did you notice any effect of student dropout rate or more incompletes? Like, were students, kind of, getting more lazy, figuring, it's so short a time, why bother to study until the last minute? Were they really influenced in that way?

HK: I really don't know that I ever noticed any connection between the period and the number of dropouts. There definitely is a connection in the quarter system, being as short as it is. If a person is sick for a week, he nearly has to drop out, because you can't hardly catch back up before the quarter's over.

The semester system—at least the old type semester system—you had ample time to make up a week's sickness or some cause for going out of class. The other side of the coin is that if you are—for some reason you have to miss classes for longer than that period of time, well, in the quarter system you don't have to wait as long before the next one starts. So you can get back into school if for some reason you have to drop out. So it's hard to evaluate which system is the better. I know I like the semester system the better, but this is just personally.

CD: Well, finally on the idea about semester-quarter system, which one do you think the students become—would be better qualified under, and get more money's worth out of: semester, trimester or quarter system? From what you've seen from—not just in physics, but all over the whole university.

HK: Before you would answer a question like that, you need to make some kind of study. I haven't done this, so all I can answer is in terms of opinion. I really think trimesters in the fashion that we had them was not a good system at all because we were using semester hours and it just wasn't good. But quarters and semesters were essentially about equal, as far as I can tell, in the teaching processes for both. One good evidence for it is

that the two systems that are used pretty widely all over the country. One good argument for the semester system is that it's been around for many, many years, so people keep coming back to it.

I lean towards the semester system, because I really believe it's, academically, more sound than the quarter system. There's bound to be some period of time to cover certain subjects that's better. It can go to the extremes for very long times, or it can go to the extremes for very short times. Surely that isn't a maximum way of learning. And apparently the quarter semesters are sort of the best sort of periods of time, because so many people have adopted it. But my preference is still the semester.

CD: What would you think was the influence on students when they got more or less control of student activity fees?

HK: You're really asking me something I have very little information on. I don't know.

CD: All right, then. Well, how rowdy—or what you felt like—was the spirit of the students during the early years, versus the years of the student riots across the country and today?

HK: I think the students today are much more interested in the course work, much more serious about the course work than they were during the periods of the sixties [1960s], where the Vietnam War sort of just had a cloud over every educational institution that just wouldn't seem to let up. But many of the rules and regulations we still have were influenced by the student opinions of that time. And now we have a whole new student generation who aren't aware of those things, and probably if they spoke up would not be in favor of the rules that have come about, due to that particular time.

But that's the tendency, being an educational institution, to be fairly slow to change. And by the time the changes take place, the students that initiated that changes are graduated and gone. It's the next generation of students that are the ones living with these rules, and this is probably why there's always students clamoring for some kind of change in the rules and regulations. It is, and should be, a slow process, because you need to think about changes that you're going to make, and there's always been a lag between the changes and the student.

CD: The difference in this spirit—how would you think it was in comparison to other universities across the country? I mean, were we more activist, more radicalistic, you know, in comparison? How would you say?

HK: Our students were disturbed—at least the ones I was familiar with—and concerned about the things that were going on. But I really think they took a more adult view of the situation existed than most other schools. One reason might have been the fact that we're a commuter school, and a large percent of these students went home each night. That's bound to make a difference. I think as a whole our students are more serious than other

schools, in terms of their studies. And even though we had difficulties, I think they were fairly minor compared to what happened at some other places.

CD: What was about like the most extreme (inaudible) friction between the students and the university, would you say?

HK: I really couldn't know. One of the difficulties that we used to discuss in meetings all the time were the meetings the students had during the free hour. When they would have speakers in—would have large amplifiers, and they would continually want the amplifiers to be louder, and we would want them to be a little quieter. Sometimes these meetings ended up with some disturbances between the students and administration, but I don't think it really was ever too extreme. I don't remember that it was. Sometimes people would get arrested, but it wasn't really a major confrontation.

CD: So it never really boiled over very large, in your opinion?

HK: Not on any real large scale that I'm aware of. I think the reason isn't anything that the faculty or administration can claim. I think most of it's due to the fact that we had very clear-headed students—or the majority of them were, I think.

CD: Would you say that other things either decreased or increased it? Could you give me examples of what the university did, or what the students did to decrease or increase the friction?

HK: I don't know that I can give you specific examples. The administration—I was on a couple of committees that, when it would look like a confrontation was coming up, the administrators that I was familiar with would always ask whoever the leaders of the students were—if we knew who they were—to come in and discuss the problem. And quite often cooperation was attempted, unless there was just a flagrant refusal to do any cooperating on the part of one side or the other. The administration sometimes ran into the place where they simply had to say no, when what was being requested was illegal. And the students—at least some of the more radical ones—sometimes would say “Well, it's independent of whether it's legal or not.” But those confrontations were smaller, I think, than they were elsewhere.

So I don't know of us ever having classes interrupted at any time, as a whole. Individuals may have been interrupted. It was a terrible situation, but it wasn't anything that students could do anything about, it was just the whole atmosphere of uncertainty that was everywhere over all of the younger people. It was a terrible situation, and it looked as though nothing could be done about it.

CD: When Dr. Allen first started the university and more or less made it an open university—specifically like, there was no segregation to start with—do you think that was a prime factor in decreasing or increasing any friction?

HK: Oh, I think that the fact that we've always been local, I think this decreased the friction, for sure. I mean we've—to my knowledge—never had any difficulties as far as religious or racial conflicts or concerns. Or least not with respect to the university; it may have been between groups of students—

Tape 1, side 1 ends; tape 1, side 2 begins

HK: —if this has happened, it's not to my knowledge.

CD: Okay, were there any real major—like, uh, full-time equivalent problems in the early years—you know, money to run the university? In comparison to things now, was it worse then?

HK: In terms of funding?

CD: Funding.

HK: Well, the early years the university—it seemed to me, we had sufficient funds (inaudible) for the teaching process in particular. We had enough funds to satisfy those students that we had. Now student enrollment has gone up. The funds have not gone up, and now the money is much more scarce per student than it was in the early time. I don't quite know why, but it seems to have happened.

CD: Do you think this change is making any big influences on the students? I mean, are they becoming, like, more apathetic, kind of, thinking that maybe college isn't worth it anymore, might not even finish?

HK: You know, the big changes taking place in that line—seems to me they've occurred only recently, when the legislature started charging the tuition fee, or at least the registration fee by the credit hour. Now a student—students do not have a great deal of money, and therefore they're influenced on what they take, to some extent, by the amount of money it costs to take the course. And I think this is real bad academically. I think it's the worst thing that's ever happened, truthfully, in this extent.

A student that used to be able to pay full scale—whatever this was; the full tuition fee—if he wanted to take some course outside of his field for further enrichment, he could do it without costing any more money. Now, once he sets down his fifteen or sixteen or seventeen hours and pays the money, when he looks over to another course and says, "Well, should I take this, also? I probably have time," and realizes the amount of money it's going to cost him to take that also, he's quit taking it. And this is for sure [for] some. He doesn't take as many hours as he used to take. And I think the person being penalized is the student, simply because he no longer has the number of courses that he used to take. And I still believe that education comes from taking courses.

CD: Do you feel this effect is making the student quality a little bit less, because they're not taking as many courses, or also that they might be taking courses that cost less?

HK: Yeah, I think both things are happening because—you know, whether the quality of the student—if you're talking about a physics major, he will take probably all the physics course he needs. But generally, physicists don't associate only with other physicists. He needs to take something else so he can make conversation with the people that don't want to talk about physics. Therefore, to take a course in Shakespeare, or a history course, which is purely elective, which used to he didn't mind doing. If he's pinched for money, now he doesn't do [it].

Therefore, what you're talking about is his liberal arts education. I think that's deteriorated by this, and that may be the most important part of his life, because that's his actual intermingling, or association, with his fellow man. He's cutting down on his ability to do that. I was sorry to see it happen. I think it's a bad regulation. I would much rather they would go up on the full load tuition. They'd get the same amount of money but still charge a standard tuition, from fifteen hours to a twenty-hour load.

CD: Are there any other changes you can think of that have either really (inaudible) decreased or increased the quality of students, besides these that you've mentioned?

HK: Not really. I could fuss about a lot of things that I have as prejudices, but, uh—

CD: Well—

HK: —I think that's, charging by the hour, and the fee structure is the biggest thing that I would say that has not been for the good of the student. And yet it's in such a way that students tend to like it, and it's still just plain not good for them.

CD: Okay.

HK: In our physics courses, one of the changes that has just occurred, that is also detrimental, is the fact that you're supposed to have a minimum number of students in class. Physics classes—physics majors universally all over the country are smaller classes. And if this rule is vigorously enforced, it could very easily stop us from having a physics department.

CD: This kind of rule, of course, applies to the number of people per class, to more than just physics majors. Do you think it would have any effect on students overall, like, it'd be more than just other departments that could maybe close down, or decrease the number of graduates?

HK: There—physics has a small number of majors every year. Astronomy has a small number of majors ever year. I don't know a lot about—most of the other science departments have a relatively large number, and this doesn't bother them. But those two departments could have much trouble. Geology might also have trouble.

CD: How do you think the deans influenced the students?

HK: How do I think the deans—?

CD: The deans and the presidents, and most of the people in the upper hierarchy of the administration.

HK: Uh—

CD: From what you could see, any changes that they might have produced in the students' spirit or apathy or anything.

HK: Well, I truthfully think that the faculty members are the ones that have the greatest influence over the students. Now, the deans and the vice presidents and academics hire the faculty. Therefore, indirectly they have a tremendous influence over the students, but most of their influence is through the faculty members themselves. I think the speeches and talks that are made by the higher-level administrators have a tremendous influence on the students. It either encourages them or discourages them, and I think that our administrators are well aware of this and realize that what they say is—it directly influences the faculty and the students in terms of their academic performance.

CD: Like you were saying about speeches and things that are indirectly related, such as colloquiums and speakers coming from other places in the nation—not just for physics. But overall, do you think the university is providing fairly well now, in comparison to its early years?

HK: Well, not in the science area, not anyone I'm familiar with. In the early years of the university, we had sufficient funds to fairly often invite nationally known speakers down to, to speak to us in our colloquium. And presently, this doesn't occur at all. We no longer have funds. When we get an invited speaker, he has to pay his own way, or else he's someone we're interviewing for a new position.

CD: So you'd say the students have kind of lost out due to lack of funds, that they're losing touch with the community?

HK: Well, the students have funds to invite speakers, and this lies in the hands of the students, and presumably they're inviting the people they want to hear.

Tape 1, side 2 ends; tape 2, side 1 begins

CD: How do you say the students' attitude is of labs, in comparison to classes? Do they think that it's, kind of, a waste of time, or they'd rather have more labs? How do you think their attitude's changed over the years?

HK: It depends upon the student. Each student's an individual, and I hope they remain an individual. Some labs that have large groups in them and a large number of sessions, like our general physics lab, it's very hard to give the individual student individual attention.

And he usually resents this by not particularly liking the lab. I think in the electronics lab where I have a few people that they end up liking it. And the reason I think is because they can get individual attention. And I don't think this differs very much from anything else (inaudible).

If you can't treat them as an individual (inaudible) simply because of numbers, people tend to not like it. It's only the very rare person who just likes the equipment itself, can get in and play with it and just (inaudible) independent enough, whether anybody was assisting or whether they're not. Those people are the ones who usually end up majoring in some kind of science. The lab is the essential part of it, the majority.

CD: How do you think the quality is of the labs themselves for the students? Do you think they're really getting their money's worth out of the labs, and are getting, you know, qualified by using these labs?

HK: I think the student can get his money's worth out of it, but the student again is an adult, as I said to begin with. Therefore, you approach him in the laboratory as if he's there paying his money because he wants to learn something and that he's going to contribute to that learning process by being inquisitive, and not in the sense of trying to do as little as he can in the lab. Personally, if a person wants to do as little as he has to, this is all right with me, but he's cheating himself. The state pays a lot of money for equipment, puts it in front of him with probably not as much attention as they could for a faculty member, but it is there. If he sincerely wants to learn something about it, I think he can.

But generally, I don't think students really enjoy the labs, when I think they really ought to. It's not put there to be entertaining, it's put there for them to make measurements. I think those students that really dislike it, some of them really want to do basic research measurements to start with. Well, until you learn the rules and regulations of experimental procedures, you're not going to be able to make good measurements. So I think introductory labs and intermediate labs are essential for a student to become familiar with the techniques and equipment that are available. And I know a lot of people don't like it, but it's an essential part of physics education.

CD: So, the opportunity's been there, but some students just don't take it. Would you say that the equipment all involved and the—you've got sufficient now, or did we have more in the early years, or how it is? Is it improved or has it decreased over the years, the amount of availability?

HK: We have more equipment now, but we have a lot more laboratories. Therefore the equipment is not as readily available for the students to look at as long as they want to, as it used to be. Used to [be], when you would have only one section of general physics, or two sections of general physics, during the term, then the students really could come in almost any time and play with that equipment. Now we have forty sections of general physics labs each week. Therefore, he has only a certain time slot when he can use that

equipment, and any time things get that large, it ceases to be very personal. Individual (inaudible) personal, I think they tend to dislike (inaudible).

CD: What's your overall view of the quality of students and whether they got their money's worth, classroom and lab and all things included, in comparison to the early years and to today?

HK: Well, I think the university has basically continually improving. I surely hope it has. This is what I've spent all my energies trying to do, is, I think, to try to improve the position of the students academically.

I don't know that I could put my finger on any difficulties. The problem of trying to keep up with it is continually increasing enrollments and relatively decreasing funds for that increasing enrollment. It makes it a very hard job. But I think most of the administration and faculty have done an excellent job with respect to that, and therefore, I think it's an excellent university. I think there is more being offered to any student here than the student gets, and I think the student can learn all he wants to learn on any subject he wants to take. Therefore, I think it's a good university.

CD: And would you say it's improved over the years? How much would you say it's improved in comparison to other universities across the country?

HK: Oh, I don't know that—you know, if you say how much, you're talking about a quantitative evaluation sort of thing. When I visit other schools and see the sorts of things, even well-established schools that have been in business for a long time, and look at, say, the equipment in teaching labs with very good hours, we're always, if not much, much superior, at least equal to them. Therefore, since we have all this space, the classrooms provided, the equipment provided is equal—I for sure think the faculty is likewise as equal. Therefore, I think we can be proud of our university.

CD: Well, I guess that's about it, unless you have anything really specific that you'd like to mention.

HK: No.

End of interview