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George Michaelides oral history interview by Milly St. Julien, July 24, 1985

George Michaelides (Interviewee)

Milly St. Julien (Interviewer)
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Today I am talking with Dr. George Michaelides, an Associate Professor of Mathematics, as part of the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Dr. Michaelides, what was your first contact with USF and why did you choose to come here? Could you give some of your earliest impressions of the University?

I came here in 1961. I was in North Carolina at the time. I was going to school there. I saw that a new university opened here in Tampa. Since I came through this city once before and I liked what I saw, so I decided to apply for a job and sure enough I got it.

What were some of your earliest impressions of the University? I understand that there were very few buildings and not much grass.

That is true. There was the University Center, the Administration building, the Library, the Chemistry building, and Biology. That was about it.

How did you feel when you first saw your new home?

I liked it and I will tell you why. It was a small school and the enrollment was about 1200. It was very nice.

Could you give us your impression of the interaction between the students, faculty, and administration?

It was terrific. The faculty and the students were very close to each other. It was a close association with the students. We had close
contacts and open policies. The students could come in and talk with us anytime they wanted.

St. Julien: I understand that when the University was developed, Dr. Allen had a "university mission" and it was developed for an urban area. There was also an "all university book," and it was a different concept from a lot of the other state universities. Do you recall anything about the mission? I believe that "Accent on Learning" was a part of that mission.

Michaelides: That was the motto of the University. I remember that we were so few here at the time that we knew each other. One of the concepts was that they assigned a "book of the month" that everybody participated in. I'm sure you have heard about that. The great thing about this was that everybody read the same book and sometimes they discussed it.

St. Julien: How long did that last?

Michaelides: I think it lasted for about three years. In 1965 I left for Georgia for a few years because I got a National Science Fellowship to do some further studying at the University of Georgia. So I was away for a few years.

St. Julien: Were you involved in the development of new programs in the Math Department?

Michaelides: Yes, I was in some ways. The department here was interested in recruiting good students from the local high schools, and we did have a couple of projects. We offered some calculus classes here that were not offered at the high schools at the time. We encouraged the local
high schools to start these programs. We had a class for those who are willing to work and intelligent enough to participate. They would come here to the school and take the course.

St. Julien: What was your sense of the relationship between USF and some of the older universities like Florida State and the University of Florida? How did it affect you and the Math Department?

Michaelides: To tell you the truth, I don't know much about the structure of the University of Florida or Florida State. It seems to me that this school was different at the time. They had different objectives. As I said before, we had the motto "Accent on Learning" and we tried to broaden education by not specializing the students. We wanted to give them a broad grasp of education. That was one of the reasons that we had the "book." And some of the courses that were introduced were mandatory for every student to take. There were about six or seven basic courses. In fact, we had the College of Basic Studies, and everybody had to take those courses. It was a terrific idea.

St. Julien: So when you came back from the University of Georgia, did you find that the College of Basic Studies had changed?

Michaelides: Somewhat, yes. It did change a little bit.

St. Julien: In the different administrations and presidents, from what I understand Dr. Allen was very supportive of the concept of the College of Basic Studies and the "Accent of Learning." How would you say that the other presidents that have come through have had an influence on changing that concept?
Michaelides: I don't know if it was the work of the president that changed it. It did change. There is no question about that. We don't have those things anymore. I guess the whole concept was changed at the time. It was the Sputnick era and the space age and all these things and there was so much emphasis on science and technology that we were a bit deviated from the liberal arts. There was a trend of the students being encouraged to go into science and mathematics.

St. Julien: So that would have helped your department rather than . . . ?

Michaelides: Yes, it did help the department. The department wasn't that bad at the time.

St. Julien: That is what I would like you to tell us about. How different was it compared to now? Is there more emphasis on research or on teaching?

Michaelides: At the time when we came here there wasn't any emphasis on research. In other words it wasn't "publish or perish." We didn't have that. As I mentioned before because of the space age and because of the trend of alot of people to go into science and mathematics, then things started to change. Research became one of the objectives of the department and the University in general.

St. Julien: What could you tell us about the quality of life at USF? What do you remember about how the students who were set up in the dorms, the race relationships, and the union?

Michaelides: Race relationships?
St. Julien: I have heard other people describe this area as being conservative when the school first opened. Do recall any kind of problems?

Michaelides: Not really. I wasn't involved in that, but I didn't see very many minority groups at the University. There were many people from the Latin and Spanish origins. We had plenty of those people, but there wasn't any problems concerning them as far as discrimination that I can remember.

St. Julien: You would think that would be unusual in this area.

Michaelides: We didn't have any black people at the time. I think the reason was because of the entrance requirements. They had do be at the upper 40% of the class. As far as I can remember it was always . . . I didn't know that there was any discrimination.

St. Julien: Do you recall anything about the union?

Michaelides: Which union?

St. Julien: The faculty union.

Michaelides: That was much later.

St. Julien: Do recall anything about it?

Michaelides: What I recall is . . . In fact, I don't even remember when it started. I think it was after I came back from Georgia.

St. Julien: Tell us about the community relations. You mentioned before the tape started that you had a university community band?
Michaelides: No. What I said was that we had good relations with the community. They were very supportive. We had this University Community Orchestra which was a symphony orchestra. It was in conjunction with the Music Department, and we recruited students as well as people from the community. We recruited not only from Tampa, but from Lakeland and Orlando to play in the orchestra. I want to emphasize something here. When we gave a concert, it was packed! Everytime we had a concert there wouldn't be any room but standing room.

St. Julien: So it really brought in the community?

Michaelides: Oh yes!

St. Julien: It made them aware that the University was here?

Michaelides: Of course.

St. Julien: People have mentioned the College of Basic Studies. How would you describe the set up of the Math Department when you came here? Who were some of the directors? What do recall about it?

Michaelides: The Department was someways divided between the department for Basic Studies and Liberal Arts. Some members of the Department belonged to one or the other. I didn't care too much for that. It was alright to have seven math courses which were mandatory for all students, but to divide the faculty in that sense it was inefficient. It really didn't serve much purpose.

St. Julien: When did they put the . . . .
Michaelides: Not that there was any friction among the faculty members that belonged to one of the other divisions, but it was unnecessary.

St. Julien: Why did they split them like that?

Michaelides: I really don't know. I am still wondering because we did want to do away with it, but nobody did anything about it.

St. Julien: So they basically taught the same courses in each college?

Michaelides: Oh sure. I was in the College of Liberal Arts, not the College of Basic Studies. I was teaching in both. I was teaching liberal arts math courses and basic college math courses. It was true for other members of the faculty.

St. Julien: Then they put them all together after they did away with the College of Basic Studies?

Michaelides: Oh yes.

St. Julien: They combined them all in one department?

Michaelides: Right.

St. Julien: There is one other question that I would like to ask you and this has to do with the Johns Committee. Do recall anything about it? What could you tell us about? What would you be willing to tell us?

Michaelides: It was a little unfortunate. I don't know how to describe it. They were ghost chasers. I remember one time I went (national) because it was perhaps a little characteristic of mine own. I don't want to
mention names, but we had a member here who happened to grow a beard. It was mentioned to John Allen or a member of his staff and they said, "We don't want these people because they must be communists or undesirables." That was true.

St. Julien: I have had someone tell us that they noticed that there was alot more friction after the Johns Committee. Not so much friction as mistrust among the faculty after the Johns Committee than there was before.

Michaelides: I wouldn't be surprised. My department wasn't that much involved with it. I think their mandate was for other departments, particularly English. So we didn't really suffer any consequences of that.

St. Julien: Do you remember any kind of student activism on campus? I believe the period during the '60s was a turbulent time in our history. Because our university was just starting out, was there any kind of . . . ?

Michaelides: Up to '64 everything was quiet and nothing went on. After that I left, and I was in Georgia and that is when the real activity started. I was in Georgia so I don't know what happened here at the time. I believe it was relatively quiet from what I heard.

St. Julien: What changes did you notice when you came back after being away for so long?

Michaelides: The University grew tremendously. They increased the load of the faculty members. There were alot of buildings going up. The University was out of the city limits at the time. It was almost wilderness when I came here. There were no developments anywhere surrounding the area. When I came back, there was a tremendous growth at the time.
South of Fowler, for instance, there were empty lots and fields. When I came back they were filled up with houses. Then they started to the east of the University and to the north.

St. Julien: Did they have grass?

Michaelides: Yes. They were covering the sand wherever possible.

St. Julien: Is there anything else that you can think of that you would like to talk about or any stories that you recall that stick out in your mind?

Michaelides: You mean when I came back from Georgia? Nothing really except that you can see and sense the growth of the University was growing by leaps and bounds. The growth was beyond expectations. I think when I first came here there was a projection that by 1970 that the University was going to grow to about ten thousand. That surpassed and they really weren't prepared for that. They didn't plan it for that tremendous growth that occurred. So I suppose whoever is responsible, they got the money from the legislature in Tallahassee and they started building again.

St. Julien: Looking back over the time that you have been here, what would you consider one of the better trends that you saw develop in the University and what were some of the less desirable trends that developed during your tenure at this University?

Michaelides: When the University first opened there was a cohesiveness. Everybody knew each other. Everybody knew everybody else. There was a camaraderie. There was very close contact with each other. Then, of course, when there is the tremendous growth, the departments grew apart from
each other and the social life was confined to the departments themselves. There wasn't any interaction with other departments. There was a drifting apart. I miss the early days.

St. Julien: Could you tell us about the closeness with the administration in the early days and some of the financial differences that you see?

Michaelides: I don't know about the financial differences, but there was an open door policy. If I wanted to see the dean or the vice president it was easy to do. The only thing I had to do was walk in his office and say what I had to say. Even the president was always ready to speak with somebody. One of the features that I remember was that at the time that we had a certain amount of money that every department got, and each member got an equal amount of money to attend any meetings that they wanted to attend. I recall one time that I wanted to go to a national math meeting and I asked our chairman about it. He said that we didn't have any money because we had spent all the money trying to recruit some faculty members. I thought we had so much money at our disposal to attend these meetings. He apologized and said that he didn't know what to do about it. So I said that I would go to the vice president about it and talk to him. I walked in his office, told him about it, and he said for me to get my airplane ticket and that he would get me the money. That was it. No explanation or nothing. He said that I was allowed so much money and that I would get it.

St. Julien: So now you can see that there is a big difference in the money appropriations and how it is distributed.
Michaelides: Of course, we probably or possibly cannot have this kind of situation now because the University is so big that it may be just impossible to accommodate everybody now. That was the difference between a small university and a big one.

St. Julien: Thank you.