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John Smith oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, June 15, 2004

John L. Smith (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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Narrator: Dr. John L. Smith
Current Position: Former Dean of the
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Background

Dr. Smith grew up in a small town in Louisiana. He earned a bachelor's degree in music education from Lincoln University in Missouri, and went on to Indiana University where he obtained his master's degree in music education as well as a performance certificate in tuba. From there, he worked as a teacher until he received "an invitation from Uncle Sam to work with him for a while." After spending four years in the United States Navy, he got his first professional job playing the tuba with the Oklahoma City Symphony.

Higher education

He got into higher education by first teaching at Langston University, and later becoming a professor and chair of the music department there. After six years, he was contacted by former colleagues about an open position for a tuba player and instructor at the University of South Florida. Dr. Smith later found out that in order to meet diversity standards, the University was looking specifically to hire an African American, and was awarded the post. "I think at the time I was probably the only African-American professional tuba player in the country! Nevertheless they were familiar with my abilities ... and felt good about recruiting me here." Dr. Smith first arrived on campus in 1972.

First impressions of USF

Before making the move to USF, Dr. Smith had never before been to Florida, nor had he had worked at such a large institution before. "I didn't know what to expect. I had some anxieties, naturally." He found South Florida to be a particularly challenging environment, though he was certain that he had something to offer the university. Additionally, Dr. Smith was confident that he would be surrounded by welcoming colleagues at his new post.

Racial climate at USF in the early 1970s

"What I did not anticipate for the most part was the racial climate," Dr. Smith reflects. After being involved in civil rights struggles back in Oklahoma, he welcomed the move to a more cosmopolitan region of Florida where he "did not anticipate facing the intense racial situation on campus" at USF in the early 1970s. Though new to the campus and

untenured in the department, Dr. Smith refused to walk away from instances of discrimination and resistance that he faced as an African-American. “It was something that was very serious to my heart to deal with – to improve the climate in which I was going to work.”

African-Americans students, staff, and faculty

When he arrived on campus in 1972, Dr. Smith recalls that there were very few tenured African-American faculty members on campus. On the university staff, he observed that blacks tended to occupy very low-level positions of employment. “In terms of the students,” he reflects, “it was a kind of a revolving door.” While there was a great attempt to recruit black students to the university, the students were “not able to sustain themselves” and found “very little support” in a “very white environment.”

Black community’s perceptions of USF

Dr. Smith also recalls a “very negative perception” of the university in the local community, where “it was known to the black community ... that they were not welcome.” After observing all of these things, Dr. Smith decided that if he was going to make a home at USF, such issues would have to be confronted.

Black Faculty and Staff Caucus

Not long after he arrived at the University of South Florida, an organization formed by black faculty and staff members started meeting regularly in an “attempt to bring people together” to discuss issues and experiences as African Americans on campus. “At that point I realized that there was a great deal of intimidation - that these individuals were afraid of losing their positions, few as they were, at this institution ... [and they] were not willing to confront it.” Nevertheless, he decided to do just that, organizing as many people as possible to begin dealing with discrimination on campus. The organization was known as the Black Faculty and Staff Caucus, later becoming the Black Faculty and Staff Congress, which still exists at the University today. Though they were all members of the university, they were not a formal university organization. “We felt that we could not work as part of the structure, we had to work external[ly].”

Meeting with President Mackey

During its second year as an organization, the Black Faculty and Staff Caucus was able to obtain an audience with then USF President Cecil Mackey. The Caucus gained the support of President Mackey, who pledged to help eliminate discrimination and encourage racial diversity at the university.

Doctorate at the University of Missouri

During his third year at USF, Dr. Smith took advantage of an Equal Opportunity Grant offered by the state university system to go back to school and earn his doctorate degree. Being the “first black faculty to receive that award,” he and his family left immediately for the University of Missouri where he has already begun working on his doctorate. “I feel very fortunate that ... the system at that point had become sensitive to the issues of diversity that they offered this opportunity.”

Fine arts culture

In terms of fine arts, Dr. Smith remembers that, “There was not very much going on in Tampa in regards to culture” outside of the university during the 1970s. Throughout the year, USF was hosting events such as theatre productions, gallery shows, and music concerts. When Dr. Mackey left the university, the emphasis at USF shifted from liberal arts education to the development of specialized colleges. As a result, fine arts became much less a priority for the institution and its future development, and the program’s budget was reduced significantly.

Doctorate; Tenure

Dr. Smith received his doctorate in 1979, and was granted tenure at USF shortly thereafter. Carl Riggs, whom Dr. Smith considered a good friend, was encouraging and supportive of his academic pursuits.

Courses; Advising; Administration

In the meantime, Dr. Smith was teaching courses in music theory to freshman students as well as instruction in tuba. He also served as academic adviser for approximately one-third of the students in the fine arts program. From there, he was recruited to serve as the coordinator of advising for the College of Fine Arts, where he began to take on a more administrative role. As an administrator, Dr. Smith was involved in writing a comprehensive plan for the recruitment of minority faculty and students to the university. Later, he also began working with personnel and payroll issues. After some time, Harrison Covington appointed Dr. Smith as assistant dean of the College of Fine Arts.

Formation of the College of Fine Arts

Initially, fine arts functioned as a division of the university, headed by Harrison Covington. In 1972, the structure changed, and the fine arts program became a college of its own within the university. When the College of Arts and Sciences was developed years later, the fine arts program chose not to join, instead remaining an entity of its own. “We had to fight rather rigorously to not be included in that ... [but] we didn’t fit; we were so unique in what we did, in terms of our performance areas. It would be difficult for us to be evaluated fairly ... We felt that this was not a good fit ... [and so] we were able to maintain our autonomy.”

Interim Dean

When the position of dean of fine arts was vacated in 1987, Dr. Smith was appointed interim dean by his colleagues in the college, making him the first African American to be appointed to such a high-level position at the university. “I was shocked, but pleased. I wasn’t sure I was ready for that, but I was talked into it ... That was indeed a challenge.”

Project Thrust

During this period, Dr. Smith was responsible for organizing an official committee that dealt with issues of racial discrimination and diversity at USF. They also created a program called “Project Thrust” with the purpose of attracting, retaining, and providing support to minority students, “So that they can sustain their tenure at the University – and it worked ... It’s been very productive and I think that’s why it’s [still] on campus today.”

Dean of the College of Fine Arts

In 1988, Dr. Smith officially became dean of the College of Fine Arts, and began doing long-range planning for the college. At the time, the college consisted of approximately six hundred students. The faculty that he inherited as dean, Smith recalls, were “incredibly good ... they were terrific.” Since the program’s formulation years before, it has always been a priority to recruit for a strong and successful arts program. While they had a strong faculty, Smith believes that they seriously lacked in diversity, “which is one of the issues I continue to deal with.” Smith challenged his faculty to acknowledge new directions and examine new ways of seeing their responsibilities in higher education. “My philosophy is that the university ought to be leading our communities rather than following. That we should be an incubation [*sic*] of new ideas for our communities ... It’s always a challenge to keep the university, as a whole, moving ahead.”

USF Contemporary Art Museum

Also as dean, Dr. Smith was instrumental in creating a Fine Arts museum facility outside of the department itself, where a distinct space was provided for regular art shows and exhibitions. “Moving it out as a separate entity I think was good for the museum because it could grow and become a very competitive museum on the national market – and it did.” They also successfully reintegrated the graphic arts program into fine arts during Smith’s tenure as dean of the college.

Fine arts library

During his tenure as dean of the College of Fine Arts, Dr. Smith explored the possibility of having a fine arts library at the college. However, the University did not allow it because they did not feel it was a very efficient enterprise. Still, it was important to him to maintain a suitable collection in the main campus library.

Department accreditation

Significantly, both the art and theatre departments were accredited during this period. In addition, several new academic programs were introduced, such as a bachelor’s of arts in music, as well as minor degrees in all of the arts. Many new general education classes were also opened up for all students at the university. Smith estimates that they were teaching approximately 1,000 non-major students each semester during this period.

Additional programs

A new program was also created, called the Center for Research in Arts and Technology, as “an attempt to integrate new technology into art.” They also started the International Institute of Vocal Arts, developed an art in public places program, and continued several study abroad programs in Paris, Costa Rica, and London. Additionally, they renewed a program called the “New York Semester,” which took students into the heart of the art district in New York City to experience life in the professional world. Fundraising was also a high priority for the college, and as a result they were able to successfully acquire three endowed chairs in African art, dance, and theatre. “So [there] was a lot of progress going on in the college.” The entire time, Smith believes that the college was successfully increasing diversity among students and faculty within the fine arts programs.

Technology

When Smith was first appointed as dean of the College of Fine Arts, he believes there were no more than five computers in the entire college. By the time he stepped down from the position in 1998, the college was in possession of close to six hundred computers in addition to a couple of computer labs.

Events

The College of Fine Arts also hosted a number of significant events during Smith's tenure, including the World Conference for the International Society of Music Education, the Annual State Dance Festival, and a Broadway theatre project, among others.

President of Fisk University

Dr. Smith stepped down from his position as dean in 1998 with the intention of taking a leave of absence and then returning to the classroom. However, he received an offer to serve as president at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, which he accepted.

Recent growth at USF

When he comes back to visit USF now, the first thing he notices is the tremendous construction and physical development of the campus. "Bricks and mortar everywhere, rising out of the ground ... Visually it's impressive."

End of Interview