

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH SPSU PRESIDENT LISA A. ROSSBACHER

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TS: There's a lot about your background that maybe we can fill it in later on. But you went to Dickinson College where you were an honor student [graduated summa cum laude 1975]. You go on and get a doctorate [from Princeton University in 1983 in Geological and Geophysical Sciences]. Then you came back and taught at Dickinson College, where you were an administrator [Dean of the College, Professor of Geology, and Dean of the Faculty, 1995-98]. You might have stayed there for the rest of your career. So what is it that attracted you to Southern Polytechnic?

LR: The most important thing that attracted me to Southern Polytechnic is the kind of education that students get here. It's unusual for someone in higher education to move from a public university [California State Polytechnic University] to a private one and back to a public one. But I had a wonderful opportunity to do that. Although it was great being back at my alma mater, the general education curriculum was the same one that had been there when I had been a student there. When I tried to talk about and actually when I raised the question, "What do we expect our students to do with their education," there was some pushback from the faculty and the question, "Was I trying to turn it into a vocational institution?" So when I found out about the opportunity at Southern Polytechnic and the focus of the application of knowledge to solve real-world problems, that appealed to me so much. It was in contrast to an approach that was on the other end of the spectrum—knowledge for the sake of knowledge. So the practical application of knowledge at Southern Polytechnic appealed to me a great deal. I actually found out about this opportunity...

MS: I was going to ask.

LR: Back up just a little bit. When I was working as the chief academic officer—dean of the faculty—at Dickinson College, my husband [Dallas D. Rhodes] was still out in California. We assumed he was going to make the transition at about the same time, and then things happened. So we were having a bi-coastal marriage for a couple of years. After about two years of that, living in different time zones, actually our goal was to get into the same time zone. So we applied for a combination of opportunities. I was looking for what was out there, and I saw an advertisement in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for the presidency at Southern Polytechnic State University. I started my academic career at Cal Poly Pomona—California State Polytechnic University—Pomona. When I became an administrator there, I got interested in what it meant to be a polytechnic institution. I did my own survey. I called people at every school that had polytechnic in its name, and I said, "What does this mean to you? How did you get that name? How is that reflected in your curriculum and your operations?" So I knew every

school in the country that had polytechnic in its name, and I had never heard of Southern Polytechnic State University. It really got my attention. How did I miss one? It turns out the name was only a year old.

TS: Right, the summer of 1996 [when Southern Polytechnic gained university status].

LR: Yes, a new name, but it really got my attention because it had the polytechnic name. So I started learning more about it and became more interested when I learned about the focus of the programs. As it turns out, my husband got a job offer in the University System of Georgia first.

TS: At Georgia Southern University?

LR: Yes, as department chair for Geology and Geography. So he had to make a decision about that. He accepted it, and I just dropped out of every other search I was in, and it worked out.

TS: How about that! Well, you are going back to being three time zones apart again, aren't you?

LR: No! We're both moving.

TS: Are you?

LR: Yes.

TS: That's good!

LR: Yes, we're moving together and with our dog.

TS: That's great! I read the speech you made to the Board of Regents [on October 11, 2005], when they were on campus here. At that time, I guess, the overarching theme of the speech was surprise—there's a lot of things that you don't know about Southern Polytechnic. Do you think it was kind of a secret to the rest of the world back then?

LR: Yes.

TS: And do you think that's still the case, or do you think you've got your message out?

LR: I think there's always an opportunity to get your message out more broadly and more clearly, but I think we've made great progress in getting recognition and increasing the visibility of the university. Some of that has come from our academic programs. Some of it has come from the successes of our students and faculty. And some of it has come from strategic marketing campaigns that have helped to get the word out.

TS: One of the things I wanted to ask you to reflect on is Southern Polytechnic—I don't know the exact enrollment figure when you came in 1998, but I know it was still only about 3700 or 3800 when you spoke to the regents in 2005. It's about doubled from when you arrived here to today. So can you talk about the growth? That was a strategic plan. Could you talk a little about that?

LR: Certainly. In the last 15 years we've increased the enrollment by about 78 percent. From my perspective, there are three major contributors to that. Obviously, there are many things, and a lot of them are the one-on-one individual interaction with faculty like Mark and staff people who just make a difference in students' lives. But if you look at the big picture, I think the three major factors in that enrollment increase are that we added some programs that are extremely attractive to new students—the Engineering programs (Civil, Electrical, and Mechanical Engineering) have been growing dramatically. The New Media Arts program grew by 50 percent this year.

MS: Game Design.

LR: Right, Computer Game Design and Development. So there are a number of new programs that have drawn students here. The New Media Arts is an interesting one because it was designed originally as more of a retention tool for students who got here and wanted to do technological things, but wanted to combine more of the design element. It was meant to provide them other options here, but it has ended up being incredibly popular as a destination major. Students come here because of that.

MS: Which is unusual for our department.

LR: Yes. So it's been wonderful, but, some new academic programs. We've also done a much better job of marketing the programs we already have and increasing their visibility through some strategic campaigns, through unifying our communications efforts. We had separate entities for Public Relations and for the website. We've put all that together, and increased social media presence. The marketing has been a piece of that. The third major contributor to our enrollment growth is focusing on retention. When you talk to people in the business community, they know it is a lot more cost effective to keep the customers you have than to go out and get new customers. In the same way, it's much more effective to make sure the students we have are successful than to not pay attention to retention and graduation and student success and to bring students in and allow them to leave.

TS: Right, I see that the six-year graduation rate now for [the fall 2006 cohort] of first-time students is [35.2] percent, and that is up by [more than 2.5 percentage points] from the year before.

LR: Yes. The important point there is that is the institutional graduation rate. It is really a very narrow piece of our total enrollment.

TS: Yes, I understand.

- LR: It's first-time, full-time freshmen who come to Southern Polytechnic and graduate from Southern Polytechnic within six years. We have a large population of transfer students who are not reflected in that number at all. Because of the very focused nature of our curriculum and the expectation that for most majors, [the] students will have to take calculus—it used to be almost every major, but it's still most of them—historically we haven't had other options for the students. As we've added new majors, we've broadened the curriculum, but sometimes we just don't have what a student is really interested in. They discover that after they get here. So our job is not to only pay attention to our retention and graduation rate if it is not the right thing for the student. Sometimes we will counsel—it happens everywhere, or should—but we will advise students to transfer somewhere else where they will be more successful that has a program that we don't offer. That has a negative impact on our retention and graduation rates, but it is the right thing for the students.
- TS: Consolidation may be good in that sense, if [an engineering technology student has the option to] change to history, for example, without leaving the university.
- LR: The University System has started using data that are not focused on institutional graduation rates, but system-wide. Our retention rate at Southern Polytechnic looks much better.
- TS: Isn't that 49 percent?
- LR: Right [a six-year graduation rate for the fall 2006 cohort of 48.8 percent for students who first enroll at SPSU and graduate from any of the USG institutions. The figures for the fall 2007 cohort are even better: 38.03 percent for first-time, full-time freshmen who started at SPSU and graduated from SPSU by summer 2013, and 51.28 percent for those who enrolled at SPSU in fall 2007 and graduated from any USG institution by summer 2013].
- TS: Kennesaw State is about the same. [43.38 percent of KSU's fall 2007 cohort of first-time, full-time students had graduated from KSU by summer 2013, and 53.40 percent had graduated either from KSU or from another USG institution by summer 2013].
- LR: [The system-wide graduation rate] is a much more valuable metric for student success because our goal is to make sure they earn that degree, and if earning it here is the right thing, that's great, but if it is somewhere else in the University System, I think that is a more valuable way of looking at the data.
- TS: Right, and I think a comparison with Georgia Tech probably wouldn't be appropriate, because their students are practically all traditional-aged students.
- LR: Right, that's part of how, and I'm sure Zvi [Szafran] told you the story about getting Engineering here. We worked with [Georgia Tech] to demonstrate that there was an unmet demand for Engineering programs for non-traditional students, part-time students,

and in an evening/weekend format. So these are all populations that are not the service area demographic for Georgia Tech.

TS: Do you actually offer a lot of the Engineering programs on weekends and Fridays and so on?

LR: We don't offer a lot of them, but a student could earn an Engineering degree by taking courses at times that mesh with their work schedule. It's not exclusively evening/weekend, but a student can earn a degree that way.

TS: Zvi did talk about the dealings with Georgia Tech. It sounded like a lot of you could teach in Conflict Management after succeeding in persuading them. I did want your take on that.

LR: I think what made that successful was the willingness of Zvi and the deans and faculty to collaborate and to work with their colleagues at Georgia Tech to figure out a way that we could work together to really demonstrate that there was this unmet need and how we could fill a niche that Georgia Tech wasn't interested in. When the Board of Regents approved the Engineering programs for Southern Polytechnic [on August 12, 2009], the first person to congratulate me was the president of Georgia Tech [Dr. G.P. (Bud) Peterson].

TS: Is that right—which is good!

LR: It really was. It's really about the power of collaboration.

TS: Right. Did you have a problem with the chancellor's office on this or was the problem entirely with Georgia Tech in adding Engineering in addition to Engineering Technology?

LR: The chancellor's office was supportive of what made sense for course development in the State of Georgia. Once we demonstrated with a credible study—we contracted an outside consultant with Georgia Tech to do the study to demonstrate the demand—the chancellor [Erroll B. Davis Jr.] was supportive. He wanted us to work it out with Georgia Tech, which we did. And we also had some members of the Board of Regents who were very supportive as well, including Georgia Tech alumni.

TS: Was there any community involvement—legislators or the Chamber of Commerce in moving toward the Engineering degrees?

LR: I think the Chamber of Commerce may have written a letter, but the alumni were hugely supportive, and many of them are well placed in the industry. As you know, if you looked at my remarks when the Board of Regents met here on campus [in 2005], we had business leaders involved in that event. A representative of Georgia Power spoke to the Board of Regents, and he is now the president of the Chamber of Commerce.

TS: David Connell?

LR: Yes.

TS: He's an interesting person.

LR: Yes, and an engineer.

TS: I didn't realize that until recently—an engineering degree from Auburn, I believe. He has been very actively involved in the Cobb NAACP and lots of community organizations.

LR: Yes.

TS: I'm trying to remember the name of the president and CEO of Georgia Power that you mentioned in your 2005 speech that was a Southern Polytechnic graduate.

LR: Mike [Michael D.] Garrett [Georgia Power president and CEO, 2004-2010].

TS: Along with the growth of the student body, why don't you talk about the expansion of facilities while you've been here and what kind of battles you had to engage in to get more facilities?

LR: We've just about doubled the square footage on campus in terms of facilities.

TS: Since 1998?

LR: Yes, and that includes a couple of major academic buildings. There was one that was completed not long after I got here, which is the one where Mark's office is [located].

TS: The Atrium Building?

LR: Yes, and when that was completed, it really shifted the center of academic gravity on campus because most of the deans are in that building.

MS: A lot of core courses.

LR: Lot of core courses; lot of faculty office space. So it really created a nucleus for many of the academic programs. It dramatically needs to be expanded now, but that's a different issue. We also built the new Architecture Building and, most recently, the new Engineering Technology Center.

TS: Oh, yes, [our History & Traditions Operational Working Group] went on a tour through there the other day.

LR: So there are the new buildings that are significant. For all the new academic buildings, we've had a philosophy of transparency in a literal sense. This is less for the Atrium

Building, but since then, Architecture and Engineering Technology—there's a lot of glass. There's a real focus on, from any point in the building, everywhere being able to see outside and for other people in the building to see what's happening in the classes.

TS: That's right, because when we walked through, you could see in every classroom. I think that might be upsetting to some people to have strangers in the hall glaring at them through the glass, but...

LR: I think it's a great way to illustrate what happens in the laboratories and classrooms.

TS: Yes, because it is different here, I guess, that they are doing their team projects and what have you.

LR: Right. That's really been a philosophy for the design of the new facilities we have. We've also some really significant things in terms of renovation of existing facilities. The old original Architecture Building, for example, was slated for demolition. Then the more we looked at it, the more we thought how it could be redesigned and repurposed. It's complete now or almost complete in terms of the renovation.

MS: I haven't seen any part of it that's not complete, and we were in there just the other day where the architectural exhibits [are on display] in the I2 Building you are talking about [Design Building 2]?

LR: Actually, I1 [Design Building 1].

MS: I don't know about the I1 building then. Okay.

LR: We've systematically done a number of renovations of existing facilities, partly because it's less expensive than knocking them down and building a new one, and because that's what the State of Georgia is funding now is renovations and repurposing.

TS: Is that right?

LR: Yes, the days of getting just new buildings haven't been around for a few years and won't be for a few more. There is a real focus on reusing existing space. And a lot of our buildings have hit the fifty-year mark.

TS: Which means they are National Register [of Historic Places] eligible.

LR: That's right.

TS: I believe in historic preservation, so this is exciting to hear that the Board of Regents has moved in the direction of renovation because they haven't had a good record always in the past.

- LR: Yes, but they talk about it as being good stewards of state resources. We do have a couple of small buildings that are now following a path to ultimately be demolished. There are some serious environmental issues relating to mold and asbestos and things like that. The cost of trying to rehabilitate those buildings—it's not worth it. But as a historian, you would appreciate the details of that process are expensive. We have created a photo documentation of the buildings, so that there is a historical record of its details. Ultimately, nothing can happen until the governor signs off on it.
- TS: That's interesting. I used to tell people that there are a couple of buildings on the KSU campus that probably ought to go before they're fifty years old.
- LR: Right, but one of the interesting things about this campus is that when it was originally built in the early 1960s [opened in Marietta on October 2, 1961], the original eight buildings of which this [the Administration Building] is one—although this space [the presidential office suite] is an addition—the original eight buildings were constructed for a million dollars. Although there is one that is slated to be demolished, all the rest of them are still in use. So the State has really gotten a return on that investment.
- TS: Oh, absolutely! Wow! Well, we talked about retention a little earlier, but one of the things about retention that I think is really interesting about Southern Polytechnic is that in the last Fact Book that you have online [the 2011-12 Edition] retention was actually better for African American students than it was for white students by several percentage points [a six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time black students in the 2005 cohort of 36 percent, compared to 33 percent for white students].
- LR: Yes.
- TS: Those things don't happen by accident, I don't think. Could you talk about diversity on campus here and what you've done to promote diversity?
- LR: You already know that Southern Polytechnic ranks Number One in the country for the number of African Americans who earn bachelor's degrees in engineering-related fields—that is Engineering Technology. Almost 50 percent of our student population is non-white.
- TS: I saw that! I believe only 52 percent white. [In the 2011-12 Fact Book the figures for the fall 2011 headcount enrollment by race/ethnicity were whites 52.3 percent, blacks plus those listing two or more races 25.7 percent, Non-Resident Aliens 7.4 percent, Hispanics 6.2 percent, Asians 5.7 percent, and unknown or others 2.6 percent].
- LR: Yes. It is an extremely diverse campus in terms of race and ethnicity and geographic origin.
- TS: And in a place where you have to be good at math to get in and where the SAT scores are phenomenal...

LR: They have consistently for ten years been the third or fourth best for entering freshmen [behind Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia, comparable to Georgia College & State University, and ahead of the other colleges and universities in the University System of Georgia].

TS: That's remarkable, and you think often times that minorities don't do as well on the SAT test, but obviously the ones coming to Southern Polytechnic do.

LR: Yes, and I think we have done a number of things that contribute to that diversity. One of them is the commitment of faculty to student success, helping students to be successful in their classes and to persist and graduate. That's a reputation that attracts other students. Part of that is a function of who the faculty are and the extent to which they care about the students and will go out of their way to help students be successful. [Another part of it is], (because of the nature of the curriculum) we have fairly small classes. What's the largest space you can have a class on campus? It might hold 100 people.

MS: The J [Atrium] Building Auditorium will hold 100 or so. We don't have many big lecture classes.

LR: We have a lot of labs that are small for reasons of equipment and safety. So the students are able to develop a close connection [with faculty members] that helps them be successful. We also have a critical mass with African American students that I think is really important. We know that when we recruit students, we are not just recruiting students. We are recruiting their mothers and fathers and grandparents and cousins. So a lot of the recruiting that we do focuses not just on a prospective student, but on the families as well. It's well known that that's a key factor in recruiting and retaining students from traditionally underrepresented groups. There has to be outreach to those students that includes their families in that process. I think that's something Southern Polytechnic does well.

We also have a number of student organizations that are supportive of and that involve students from traditionally underrepresented groups. Just two examples: one is the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, which provides a critical mass for that group and has some leadership development programs; also the National Society of Black Engineers has a very strong student chapter here. That organization provides leadership programs for students that help them develop inter-personal skills and leadership skills that really augment what they are learning in the classroom. For a number of years the president of the Student Government Association here at Southern Polytechnic was a product of the leadership programs the National Society of Black Engineers' student chapter would put on. So I think that leadership and that student success reinforces itself.

But one of the areas where we have not achieved the diversity I have always looked for at Southern Polytechnic is in the representation of women. Even though the campus, when it was founded 65 years ago, was coed...

TS: Right, one female student.

LR: One woman [Barbara Hudson Purdy], who visited campus a few years ago.

TS: Did she?

LR: Yes. She was studying architecture and went on to design her own home and residences for other people. But we still have a representation of only about 22 percent women [21.5 percent in spring 2013]. It may be the lowest percentage of women at any coed institution in the country. I don't know any place that has a lower percentage of women.

TS: Would Georgia Tech be greater?

LR: They have closer to 30 percent women [30.9 percent in fall 2013].

TS: Do they? Well, it is striking, walking around campus and looking at the students. There aren't a whole lot of women that you see in the labs.

MS: How well the boys know [laughs]!

LR: Some of our alumni, when they talk about their experiences at Southern Polytechnic, will say, "You remember that class? It was the one that had a girl in it." At one level that percentage of women students here at Southern Polytechnic reflects what the industry looks like. That's about the percentage of women engineers in the workplace, women computer scientists in the workplace, and so we could say, "Well, we're representative." But that's never been good enough for us. Southern Polytechnic has taken it as a mission to increase the percentage of women in those fields—not just representative of our campus, but in those fields. That's not something we can accomplish by ourselves, but it's working with business, industry, professional organizations and societies to change the image of what the work that people with those majors and in those fields do and to help students, men and women, connect with the way in which it has the interpersonal dimension—it's not the Dilbert stereotype [from the comic strip by Scott Adams], but it really makes a difference in people's lives. That's a much slower process. It's something that we've been focused on contributing to.

MS: And we've made advances there too.

LR: Yes, we have.

TS: These are 2011 figures [from the 2011-12 Edition of the Fact Book] that you have on the SPSU website, but the faculty is 31 percent female. I guess the percentage of females on the faculty makes a big difference in terms of recruiting students also.

LR: A big part of our strategic plan is about community and a sense of place on campus. One of the elements of that has to do with supporting the diversity that we have and increasing the number of women students. One of the strategies for that is focusing on women faculty and staff having the opportunities to move into leadership positions. A little over

a year ago we instituted a Women's Leadership Program for women faculty and staff to help them forward to develop strong role models for our women students. Part of that strategy is making sure we are inclusive in our pools for faculty and staff positions, helping provide professional development for the women we have here on campus and believing and looking for the ways in which that helps us recruit and retain more women students. One of the other things that has helped, as you survey the campus, is that we also have about a thousand students from Georgia Highlands [College] who are taking classes on this campus, and more than half of them are women. So that makes the campus look a little more gender diverse than it actually is in terms of the specific enrollment, but it creates a larger community on campus that's a little more balanced.

MS: And they [the Georgia Highlands students] can join all our clubs and teams too.

LR: They've been members of fraternities and sororities. Some of them live on campus.

MS: I've had some on the speech team.

TS: Good. I was thinking also—and you alluded to this in your 2005 speech to the Board of Regents—but you've had an increasing number of majors that are not engineering technology, like your communication areas [B.A. in English and Professional Communication, M.S. in Information Design and Communication, and B.S. in Technical Communication] and the B.A. program in New Media Arts. I presume that you would have a higher percentage of women in those programs.

MS: We do, yes.

TS: That would add to the diversity—but still something to work on, I guess.

LR: When I first came to Southern Polytechnic, I was speaking to one of the civic organizations, and I was talking about this, because it was an issue then too. I said, "We really want to increase the number of women enrolled at Southern Polytechnic." And one of the people attending this meeting—a man of course—said, "Then start a Home Economics program." And everyone else in the room just cringed. That has come up periodically—the suggestion that we should add programs that will disproportionately attract women, and I don't buy that. I want more women in the fields that we offer. I don't want to just artificially inflate the number of women by adding programs for that reason alone.

TS: But things like Biology with Teacher Certification and programs like that ought to attract more women students, you would think.

LR: The [teacher certification] programs are so new that we really don't have the data yet. I know that we have a number of young women in that program, but we have men too. We are looking for more systemic change, and those Education programs really are aligned with our mission. They are about education in the STEM [Science, Technology,

Engineering, and Mathematics] fields, not Early Childhood Education or something that might have a different clientele.

TS: Well, now, another type of diversity is international students and faculty. I think maybe I was even more impressed with the number of international faculty members than students here.

LR: There was a time before 09/11 when we were ranked in the Top 20 schools in the country for the number of international students we had—the number—not just the percentage, but the number was amazing. But, obviously, the international population changed somewhat after 09/11 with additional restrictions on visas and travel. But I think that having that diversity on campus—we have students from, I forget, like a hundred different countries, only a few that have more than a couple of students, but an amazing number of countries where there are one or two. They find us through word of mouth and through the Internet, but I think that's really important for our students to have that international representation among faculty, some staff, and in the other students. We have an English Language program here. It's not part of Southern Polytechnic but...

TS: English as a Second Language?

LR: Exactly. That provides an additional kind of international diversity on campus. We have several overseas study programs that are unique to Southern Polytechnic, but it is difficult for our students to participate in overseas study programs for a couple of reasons. One of them is the cost. Students here at Southern Polytechnic are very debt-adverse, and that affects what we've been talking about with our retention and graduation rates, because rather than incur additional debt, a lot of our students will take a semester off to earn money to be able to pay for the next semester. But it makes it very difficult for them to travel overseas. We have very limited resources to be able to provide scholarships for that. So there is a financial barrier to traveling, but there is also the curricular barrier. The programs we have are very full. A number of our degrees required 128 hours rather than the typical 120. Students have very limited flexibility in their electives. So if they are going to take a semester abroad, for example, they run the very real risk of realizing they are going to have to take another semester or a year to graduate with the additional costs and the lost opportunities associated with that.

TS: Plus, you've got lots of nontraditional students that have other obligations.

LR: Exactly, so there are lots of barriers to overseas study programs, aside from the occasional travel studies.

TS: Kennesaw has a student fee to support study abroad scholarships. Do you have anything like that?

LR: No, we don't. There are a number of student scholarships through our Foundation, and I know that sometimes students receive those and use the scholarship to travel, but we have almost nothing that is targeted for that.

TS: I guess with the consolidation students on the SPSU campus will be able to take advantage of that fee next year.

LR: But they'll still have the challenge of trying to get their courses in the right sequence and graduate in a reasonable time. All that makes it really important that we have the kind of international diversity on campus that we do because in a sense it provides part of an international experience for students who are right here when the students around them are from other countries. It's not a complete substitute, but it helps.

TS: I think I saw faculty from forty different countries or something like that here at SPSU. Maybe it goes with the territory in the technical fields that there is a bigger pool of international faculty that are trained in engineering and computer fields. Does that make sense?

LR: I think that's part of it.

TS: Are you actively trying to recruit international faculty?

LR: I don't think so separate from anything else. We are looking for...

TS: The best people you can find?

LR: The best people we can find, people who are committed to teaching, and engaging with students, and student success. If we are trying to influence faculty hiring, it's more about adding women than probably much of anything else. You're nodding your head, Mark. Do you agree with that?

MS: Yes, I do. We've successfully got some very good women in the technical fields.

LR: Yes, and it's ironic, we've hired some very good ones who are now getting lured away by research universities.

MS: Yes, we just lost somebody to a big university.

TS: What is the percentage of African American faculty members here?

LR: I don't remember.

TS: I don't believe I saw it in the Fact Book. That was one of the reasons I was asking.

MS: I don't know if we take that number. I'm sure it's not as big as the number of African American students we have.

LR: Yes, and one of the ways that we've actually increased the number of African American faculty is a program that I started a number of years ago of getting together once a year

with faculty and staff who are working on doctorates and having lunch with them and talking about how it's going. That does a couple of things. One is that it shows that we are serious as an institution about supporting them. These are people who are already working full-time here. It lets me express the appreciation for what they are doing, acknowledging how difficult it is. It gives them a sense of who else is in the same situation, working full time at Southern Polytechnic, trying to earn a doctorate, often with family responsibilities. So it gives them a support network.

It keeps them honest because it turns out there are people who say they are working on a doctorate, and when they know that once a year I'm going to say, "So what have you accomplished in the last year," some people have said, "You know what? I'm taking a break from that, so I won't come to your lunch this year." But, of that program, of the first five or six people who were already working here and completed their doctorate, I think something like four or five were African American. It is almost a way of growing our own faculty. We weren't paying their tuition or anything, but it was a way to support them. It didn't start out that that was the goal, but it ended up having a net effect of supporting increasing diversity among the faculty.

MS: I think Phil Patterson was one of those people [Philip Patterson, Department Chair and Associate Professor of Physics].

LR: Yes he was.

MS: He's now head of our Physics Department and works with black students in Physics and other sciences and takes them to conventions and I think a really strong advocate of African American students on campus.

TS: Before you came here, there was a huge controversy, as Mark knows very well, over a vice president for academic affairs who happened to be African American. Were there any ramifications of all those controversies, not just about race, by the time that you got here, or had they all been resolved? Were there still hard feelings from those controversies after President [Stephen R.] Cheshier retired?

LR: I think there are still ways in which that series of events is reflected in the relationship between faculty and administration now. One of the things that happened as a result of that series of events—and Mark was here, so you may correct me on this—but my sense is that part of the frustration was that faculty and staff—especially faculty—felt they didn't have any input into the leadership of the institution. There was no way to make suggestions for improvement. One of the things the faculty did was to create a process where basically every faculty member and most of the administrative directors on campus and representatives of staff council have an opportunity to anonymously comment on the presidents, the vice presidents, and the deans every year. When you compare that to other institutions, presidents might get previewed every three to five years. Every faculty member, basically everybody on campus, gets to anonymously provide me with comments every year. It may be information overload, but I think it really addresses some of the fundamental issues that seemed to cause the problems before I got here. There are other things as well. I think that there are still faculty that basically don't trust

the administration and people who say, “I can’t speak my mind because I’ll be punished or be fired.” I say, “Give me one example of somebody who was [retaliated against] for speaking his mind since I’ve been here.” Well, “I can’t give you an example.” So I think there is still some faculty/administration tension, which is true anywhere, but I think for Southern Polytechnic some of the [lack of trust] dates back more than sixteen years. Do you think that’s a fair characterization, Mark?

MS: Yes, the faculty felt that our voice was suppressed. For example, a dean ran the faculty meetings, and if there was an uncomfortable issue, it might not make the agenda.

LR: I think that the tension that existed on campus at the time was a factor when Chancellor [Stephen R.] Portch [1994-2001] chose to run the search the way he did. They announced three candidates and appointed me, and I had only been on campus one time, and it was a secret visit on a Sunday afternoon . . . Just as an aside—the fact that I had gone through that sort of search process to come here—as you know, I’m going to Humboldt State University in [Arcata] northern California, and that was an extremely confidential search, even more so. There was never a campus visit. My husband and I went up there and “snuck” on campus. But the Board of Trustees and the chancellor were so worried about the confidentiality we had to fly to Sacramento and drive six hours because they have a little, tiny airport, and they didn’t want us even flying into the airport there. The search committee was all sworn to secrecy. They made some recommendations to the chancellor and the Board of Trustees and met with them. They made a decision at a board meeting about three weeks ago. Just as part of the chair of the board’s routine report, he mentioned that they just hired me as president.

TS: Oh, my goodness.

LR: Until then, nobody on campus except for maybe five people had ever laid eyes on me. When I was there a couple of weeks ago, people kept saying, “Wasn’t that just the weirdest thing, not visiting campus?” “No, kind of how I ended up in my first job.” “Really?” That worked out okay, so it didn’t worry me in ways that I think it might have troubled other people because I had done my research, but I also knew that kind of process can work for a number of reasons. I really think that Chancellor Portch was worried about the campus [being] so divided at the time that if they had public visits—I don’t know if he was worried that candidates would get scared away or that people would line up for different candidates and undermine whatever they tried to do when they got here. I’m not sure what his reasoning was, but he was very clear. There was not going to be a campus visit at Southern Polytechnic.

TS: Were you the only female of the three finalists?

LR: No! There were two women and one man. I don’t remember the names, but I think the other two were also deans—deans of engineering as I recall.

TS: That’s interesting.

LR: Chancellor Portch was the chancellor at sort of the high water mark for women presidents in the University System.

- MS: He, in my mind, was the best chancellor we've had since I've been here. He accomplished the most.
- TS: That's interesting. [By your body language] are you agreeing with Mark?
- LR: I'm not saying that out loud because I work for the chancellor.
- TS: We do have one right now, don't we? You can say "excluding the current chancellor." Or let me ask it this way. What made Portch a good chancellor?
- LR: I think he had great vision for higher education in the state. I think he actually had great vision for Southern Polytechnic and the opportunity to build on the mission that we had, but to broaden it and to augment it with some other areas. I know that there were people when I got here that said, "Oh, no! She's going to turn this into a liberal arts college." And that was perceived as a very bad thing. And yet, that was not my charge, but Chancellor Portch was encouraging me to push the boundaries and expand the curriculum. I think it has happened in ways that remained true to the mission of the institution. [We] have retained the special focus and the kind of niche that this campus has had in the University System. We haven't turned it into a liberal arts college.
- TS: I saw where you said in the 2005 speech that over 62 percent of the degree programs were offered nowhere else in the University System. Is that still true today or have you gone more toward traditional things? And even where you've offered traditional liberal arts degrees, you've had more of a technological focus to them, I guess, like your teacher certification programs.
- LR: Right. I think we probably have fewer completely unique programs right now because a number of the ones we've added—like the engineering ones—exist other places, and some of the ones that have a unique twist to them still have the names that appear other places. Like, our Biology program is unique; our Education program; Psychology; English [and Professional Communication]. The names look like what exists other places. But we still have some that are not replicated anywhere else, like Surveying and Mapping, the Computer Game Design, and Development, the New Media Arts, and many of the Engineering Technology programs.
- TS: Are you going to be able to preserve that uniqueness once the consolidation takes place for something like a Biology major? With the consolidation do you think that the technological focus is going to go away or is that going to be preserved?
- LR: I don't know. Those are conversations that are happening among the faculty of the programs—laying out the curriculum and figuring out what the focus will be. My guess is that initially there will be aspects of the technological focus that Southern Polytechnic brings in. It will probably be noticeable initially, but how that evolves over time is hard to predict. It's going to have a lot to do with the faculty, the collaboration, and student interest.
- TS: I know we have exceeded our time, but I wonder if I could wind up with a question or two about the consolidation? I know Zvi [Szafran, the Vice President for Academic Affairs], when we interviewed him, said he first suspected it when he got an email from

you that invited the deans and everybody else to a meeting. Obviously, there was no input on his part. Did you have any input in the decision at all?

LR: None at all.

TS: When did you find out about it?

LR: Sometime around the middle of October, the third week or so.

TS: And November 1 was the public announcement?

LR: That's right. So it was about ten days before the public announcement. The chancellor asked me to come meet with him with no other information about what it was about.

TS: So just you and the chancellor?

LR: Yes. We chatted for maybe a minute, and he said, "There's going to be a new round of consolidation, and it's going to be Southern Polytechnic and Kennesaw, and the name of the institution will be Kennesaw State, and Dan Papp is going to be the president."

MS: Wow!

TS: Wow, and "have a good day" [laughs]?

LR: And my first question was, "Is there anything I can do to...?"

MS: You were very graceful through that. I kept telling [my wife] Shawn how much grace you had in all this. I know it was a tough one for you.

LR: Well, yes. So, after I talked for a while with the chancellor, I said, "We need to just get this out there as soon as possible." So we talked about the timing for an announcement. I had a professional meeting I was going to, like, the next day. So it was the first opportunity that we could put all the pieces together to make the announcement.

TS: Was November 1?

LR: Was November 1, yes. In fact, I really knew it was going to happen a few days before.

TS: Before you met with the chancellor?

LR: Yes.

TS: How did you know that?

LR: There was the October [October 8-9, 2013] Board of Regents meeting [held in Milledgeville]. One of the regents got really drunk and basically told me.

MS: I've heard that story.

TS: So you suspected why you were going to meet with the chancellor?

LR: I did, I did. One of the things, though, that has concerned me in the media coverage of it is that the Marietta Daily Journal repeatedly says that I was shocked, that I only found out the day before [the public announcement]. What I found out the day before was exactly when the announcement was going to happen—what day it was going to happen.

MS: There was some confusion in the faculty about when you had heard.

TS: That was one reason I wanted to get the record straight because I had read what the Marietta Daily Journal wrote also.

LR: They keep saying I only found out the day before. When I tried to correct them, they changed it to “[She] said at the time, ‘I only found out the day before.’” They acknowledge that I’ve since said that [they] are not reporting it correctly. I knew about ten days ahead of time. I was out-of-town for most of the intervening time, which is why, partly, that there was a delay. But I knew I had to be on campus when that happened. And I knew that I couldn’t tell anybody, even if it was like, “You’re the only person that I’m telling, and you have to keep it a secret.”

TS: Because that’s not going to be a secret very long.

MS: It was a big surprise to us [the faculty and staff], when it was announced.

LR: Yes, it was. It was a huge shock, and we choreographed the timing of the announcement so that, at least, I had a chance to tell the vice presidents and deans directly. I put out an email to the campus, and you probably saw a press release, but I said, “If you want to talk about this, I’ll be over in the Student Center at 1:00 o’clock, so come by.” Honest to God, I thought that maybe five or six people would show up, and we would pull our chairs around and just sort of talk.

TS: And everybody was there?

LR: A couple of hundred people showed up. Real quick, we found a microphone, and I just answered questions the best I could.

TS: So how did the decision come about? Was this totally Chancellor [Henry M.] Huckaby or a handful of board members? Do you know how the decision was made?

LR: I don’t.

MS: Do you know when Dan [Papp] knew?

LR: No, I don’t.

TS: Well, he says that he didn’t know until about ten or fifteen days ahead of time too. We were going through our Founders Week [50th anniversary celebration, October 7-12, 2013] and all of that, and there was no hint at that time in the early part of October.

LR: I haven’t asked him that point-blank. I don’t want to put him on the spot.

TS: If I get a chance to interview him after the consolidation process is over, I’ll ask him. I think that Zvi and others have really complimented the students [Eric Cooney, Trent

Anderson, and Austin Clayton] that spoke [on November 12, 2013] to the [November meeting of the] Board of Regents, simply because they were asking them to do things the Southern Polytechnic way of stating what the problem was, and then gathering your facts, and then reaching a transparent decision.

LR: Right.

TS: None of which happened, obviously, in this case.

LR: The students were great!

TS: I don't want to put you on the spot, but do you have any idea why they were so secretive about what they were doing in reaching the decision? To me, it would just seem common courtesy to ask opinions ahead of time, what do you think about this, from a few people that were going to be affected.

MS: Because when the other four consolidations had gone off, we knew for quite a lead-time that there were consolidations coming.

TS: Part of my question is that [the chancellor and the Board of Regents] say that they learned some lessons from the first four consolidations of mistakes they didn't want to repeat. Was one of the mistakes letting people know about it ahead of time?

LR: They really didn't let people know about it ahead of time in the first round.

MS: We just knew they were coming.

LR: Yes, the chancellor said there will be some consolidations, but which combination of institutions was...

MS: We were speculating then, if it's us, will it be Georgia Tech or will it be Kennesaw State?

LR: Yes.

TS: I was thinking it was going to be Kennesaw and Georgia Highlands as the logical one. I didn't think they would do Kennesaw and Southern Polytechnic until at least one of you [one of the presidents] retired. So it was really, really surprising.

MS: Which happened in some of the earlier consolidations that somebody was retiring.

LR: Yes.

TS: So everyone at Southern Polytechnic was totally blindsided on everything?

LR: Yes, a number of people on campus observed a pattern that the first round of consolidations—most involved a president who was retiring or there was an interim [president] already. So there were a number of people at Southern Polytechnic who said, "You can't leave because if you leave, you're going to expose the university. We will be vulnerable to consolidation if you leave, so you can't leave."

TS: So nobody can blame you, although you were applying to [a college in] Utah. Utah State, is that right?

LR: Southern Utah [University].

TS: So at least you were applying elsewhere at the time. What about Humboldt State [University]? Were you already applying there or did everything that happened there occur since November 1?

LR: Since November.

TS: So that was pretty fast. Had that job just come open?

LR: Yes. They had a very long lead-time. The president there is retiring. He had announced that maybe in August. But the search process there had a very lengthy time to gather input from the campus about what they were looking for in the next president. I wasn't even approached about that until December probably. But I returned the phone call [laughs].

TS: So they called you and said, "Do you want to apply?"

LR: Yes, they called me before it had even been advertised. Actually, the search person did.

MS: Wow! So they had a headhunter out or something?

LR: Yes.

TS: Does Humboldt State have anything in common with Southern Polytechnic in terms of mission and technology and all of that?

LR: It has a focus on the environment, and it's an interesting combination of the environmental focus and the arts. The area where it is [Humboldt County, California]—and this is actually a major difference—is a pretty rural area. Aside from a community college that is eight or ten miles away, the next closest university is probably a hundred miles. It [Humboldt State] is a real center—educational, intellectual, and economic. Some of the similarities [with Southern Polytechnic] include the importance of the local relationship with business and industry. The institution is an economic driver. The focus on the environment...

MS: Which you've done a lot of work with [at SPSU]. We've got a lot greener with you at the helm. That's a big accomplishment, I think, of your [administration].

LR: I appreciate you saying that. One of the big issues there is there are schools around the country that are doing things to be more sustainable and greener, and they are promoting it, and the people at Humboldt look at it and say, "We did that ten years ago." But they didn't get the visibility they should have for it. There is a deep commitment to teaching undergraduates. There are relatively small master's programs, but really strong undergraduate programs, like Southern Polytechnic. There is a little more of an emphasis there on undergraduate research. We are moving in that direction here, but they are farther along. They have the only ocean-going research vessel in the country that is

specifically designed for undergraduate research. They are a little larger. They have about 8100 students, which isn't that much larger than us and really not much larger than the number of students we have on campus [including the Georgia Highlands students]. They've been around for about 100 years [founded as a teacher's college in 1913], and they have a football team. So I'm getting a football team before Dan Papp does.

TS: All right!

MS: Did you want a football team?

LR: My first consideration about where to look for another opportunity is that the school color includes green.

MS: And they do. In looking for an environmental school, they are green and?

LR: Gold.

MS: Because we never really knew what our other color was. It was always green and something, a black, white. We never knew at Southern Poly.

LR: It's green.

TS: Humboldt was an explorer wasn't he?

LR: Alexander von Humboldt [1769-1859]. In fact, Thomas Jefferson was quoted as having said Humboldt was the most brilliant man he ever met, which is high praise from Thomas Jefferson. I don't have the exact quote. But, yes, he was an explorer and sort of a renaissance scientist. And the campus is 30 miles south of Redwood National Park.

TS: Sounds like a good place to go to.

LR: There's a redwood grove on campus.

TS: Well, thank you very much for the interview.

LR: Well, thank you. You may very well discover as you process all of this that there are other questions that come up. Just let me know, and we can talk some more.

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