

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENT SAMUEL S. OLENS

CONDUCTED, EDITED, AND INDEXED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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KSU Oral History Series, No. 145
Interview with President Samuel S. Olens
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
Friday, December 1, 2017
Location: Kennesaw Hall 5th Floor Board Room, Kennesaw State University

TS: Let me begin with a question about the presidential search. President [Daniel S.] Papp announced his plans to retire on May 10, 2016. At the time, you were half way through your second four-year term as attorney general of Georgia. There was speculation you wanted to run for governor in 2018. We also began hearing rumors at least by June last year that you wanted to be KSU's fourth president. Can you discuss why you wanted to be president, and how you made the decision to apply for the job?

SO: First of all I was never going to run for governor, but, politically, you didn't want to make that statement because you didn't want to lose the political capital to assist you each legislative session in making necessary change. My family knew I was not running for governor. From my perspective, the race for governor requires that you take extreme positions before you get to the general election. By that time I had had enough politics and was not interested in hyper-partisanship.

The decision to apply here was solely because I thought I would be able to do a better job for the community. When you are the president of a university, you are able to, hopefully, affect change to improve the lives of future leaders. As the state's lawyer, I was able to affect change, but I did not think in the same positive manner than can be done here at the university.

TS: Okay. Did anyone at the Board of Regents or the governor's office or in Cobb County come to you and ask you to apply for the job?

SO: I think there were a whole bunch of internal discussions. By internal, I mean, community leaders who started talking, state leaders, etc. At a given point those calls started coming to me. I initially was surprised to receive the calls, but, as I started to think about it more, I thought of the tremendous opportunity at KSU.

TS: So community leaders?

SO: Yes.

TS: That is as far as you want to go in identifying them?

SO: Yes.

TS: Nobody from the Board of Regents?

SO: No.

TS: Okay.

SO: The community leaders were reaching out to the Board of Regents.

TS: I understand.

SO: But, I was not involved in that process.

TS: But the Board of Regents was not reaching out to you?

SO: No, no.

TS: Okay. Or the governor's office?

SO: No.

TS: Okay. I think the biggest concern about the selection process on campus was the lack of a national search.

SO: Right.

TS: Would you have preferred a national search?

SO: Yes.

TS: And, I guess, maybe the follow up to this, do you have an opinion on when it is appropriate and when it is not to hold national searches for faculty or administrative positions?

SO: No, I think that is within the realm of the state applicable laws and not for me to make statements on.

TS: Well, just in general, now that you are here as president: I am assuming you are in favor of national searches for positions on campus?

SO: Absolutely.

TS: Okay, great. This is a follow up question too, but it is a little different. The Board of Regents voted on October 12, 2016, to make you KSU's president. Then you began work November 1. So you have been here thirteen months now. I know it is hard to remember exactly what you thought thirteen months ago, but as best you can recall, what was your impression of KSU before you assumed the presidency? And maybe related to that, were there any big surprises that changed your opinion about the campus community after you got here?

SO: Okay, so that is only about seven questions in one.

TS: I know.

SO: Clearly, from raising my family here, I was familiar with certain parts of the university more than others; i.e., I was familiar with the [Bagwell] College of Education, the [WellStar] School of Nursing, and the College of the Arts. Concurrently, I was familiar with Southern Poly. I was familiar with several of the programs, architecture and engineering in particular. My thoughts were that the university had made huge strides. That [former president] Dr. [Betty L.] Siegel made huge strides, and they were continued by Dr. Papp. When I came to the university, two things were immediately apparent. One, huge strides had in fact occurred and there was much to be very proud of for the university. Two, the uncontrolled massive enrollment growth had caused major operational issues at this university, some of which still continue today. The university was not in a healthy position from an operational, as compared to academic, perspective at that time.

TS: Do you think that all the problems of last year stemmed from uncontrolled growth?

SO: There wasn't a meeting that I had when I first came to the university where people didn't demand more resources and more infrastructure. No one thought they had adequate resources or infrastructure from some of the specific accreditation perspectives. By that, I do not mean SACSCOC [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges]. I mean the particular extra accreditation certain colleges want to have. They were accurate. The concerns were very accurate. At that point inadequate space, inadequate [number of] faculty, over reliance on part-time faculty, and inadequate financial controls were absolutely a problem.

TS: When you talk about uncontrolled growth, for many years we have rejected some students that don't meet the qualifications to enroll here. Are you talking about putting a cap on enrollment like UGA [University of Georgia]?

SO: Well, we have. We have put a cap on undergraduate enrollment. I was not here a month before students were seeking to register for the spring [2017] semester. Many of those students could not get required classes, so that they could graduate on time.

TS: Right.

SO: That is not acceptable. You don't have to have a career in academia to understand that a college has a responsibility to offer the courses that are needed for students to timely graduate. And we were not doing that.

TS: Do you have any sense of who was responsible for not figuring this out earlier?

SO: No, but I think that clearly the university was more interested in the revenue from the growth than the services rendered. It was similar to my days in local government. Growth provides an initial increase in revenue, but, generally, it is not consistent with the cost to provide those services.

TS: Right. I think that our history from day one has been that we have never had the resources that we needed. At least the perception was that we did not have the resources that we needed.

SO: Yes, I think the faculty and staff do a tremendous job making the best of that bad situation. I give them a lot of credit over the years for mitigating that effect. But, at the end of the day, any email or call I got relating to a student not being able to take a course that was required was a call that I found excessively frustrating.

TS: How many emails do you get a day from parents or students that are unhappy with situations on campus?

SO: Well, in a typical day it may average no more than one. Is it related to registering for spring classes last year? I would say I was getting more like thirty a day. I'll give you another example. We let students register on different days of the week. If the class is already full before a student on day three can register, that is unacceptable. But that occurs.

TS: And always has, I guess.

SO: Well, but it shouldn't.

TS: Yes. I have a follow up question on your impressions of KSU. I have heard you say a number of times that the toxic political atmosphere was one of the reasons that you wanted to get out of elected office.

SO: Yes. It is worse here.

TS: It's worse here?

SO: It's worse here.

TS: At Kennesaw?

SO: At universities in general.

TS: Well, that is what I was going to ask you. Did you think before you got here that you were getting out of politics when you got into a president's position?

SO: That was clearly a naïve position to think it would be better.

TS: And you found out otherwise?

SO: Right.

TS: That would be one of the surprises then, once you got here?

SO: Yes, I think Woodrow Wilson was asked post-presidency, of the United States, which was the hardest place to make changes? He responded, Princeton University [where he was president from 1902 to 1910, before becoming governor of New Jersey from 1911 to 1913 and president of the United States from 1913 to 1921]. And he would have been accurate.

TS: I think he probably would be.

SO: Yes.

TS: I'm surprised in a way that you wouldn't have understood that it was a political position before you got here, but I'll ...

SO: I understood it was a political position. I did not understand how adverse any change would be to certain individuals. I naively thought if it improved student success, then that would receive the appropriate due course.

TS: I see.

SO: But I find more and more that some individuals are more interested in how it affects them than student success.

TS: And are you talking about people off campus or people on campus?

SO: On.

TS: On campus?

SO: On.

TS: So campus politics is what is really toxic?

SO: Absolutely. I'm not referring to off campus. I'm referring to on campus.

TS: And when you mentioned Woodrow Wilson, obviously he was president well over a hundred years ago at Princeton.

SO: Right.

TS: So, apparently, this is something that is in the nature of higher education?

SO: Absolutely.

TS: Do you have any thoughts on what we can do to make campus politics more collegial? I mean, colleges are supposed to be a place where you can have collegial discussions. The

word collegial comes from college. Do you have any ideas on how we can get back to having a collegial atmosphere without the toxic relationships?

SO: I'm not sure this is anything new. When you look back in history, you find that these problems have existed for a long, long time. Maybe that is a good thing in part and a bad thing [in part]. For instance, I will routinely get an email from a faculty member wanting to meet with me because of a disagreement in his or her college. That's nothing new, but it occurs in some colleges way too frequently here. In some colleges it doesn't occur at all. So it is all about leadership.

TS: There is a chain of command isn't there?

SO: There should be.

TS: But they are going straight to you at any rate?

SO: Sometimes they've gone through the chain and haven't been satisfied, and then they go to me. Sometimes, they have sufficient angst with the leadership that they try to go straight to me.

TS: So how do you handle it if you get an email from a faculty member that is upset with his department chair?

SO: I frankly immediately talk to the provost and get counsel from the provost and then act based on that circumstance, after discussions with the provost.

TS: So the toxic problems come from the faculty, not from students, and not from staff? Is that what you're saying?

SO: That's been my experience, yes.

TS: Okay. Have you had second thoughts about being a college president after this last year?

SO: Sure.

TS: Okay.

SO: Sure. You know the goal was frankly to improve the community, to improve KSU.

TS: Your goal?

SO: Right.

TS: To be here?

SO: Right.

- TS: And you found that to be harder to do than you thought?
- SO: Absolutely.
- TS: Well, this is related. I know when you first got here, for several months you were having many conversations with students and faculty and staff. What were the main things you learned from those exchanges?
- SO: You learn a lot about the culture of the university, and I think this university should be very proud of its culture. There are so many examples of collaborative effort among faculty, among colleges, that is not the norm. I think the desire to create win/wins is much more prevalent at a KSU. The whole idea that we have certain degrees where you take courses from as many as three colleges is something really to be very proud of. That once again is not the norm. The entrepreneurial spirit, the decision for many faculty to try new things, to try new efforts, I think, is something similarly for the faculty to be very proud of. So I think the culture in many ways here is superior to most institutions of higher learning. A lot of those meetings taught me about that. I think that was very positive.
- TS: Any particular examples of entrepreneurial spirit on campus that you would like to talk about, that impressed you?
- SO: Well, for instance, in the area of cybersecurity, the rapport among faculty at different colleges, and the desire to do what is best—the desire to have a leading program, to put together programs that will put our students in the best possible light for positive gainful employment. Similarly, I think the College of the Arts has many faculty that really understand the business side, which is so, so important in the arts.
- TS: Are you talking about raising money?
- SO: And being able to pay for a change. I think many non-profit arts communities go under because they don't understand that reality. I think the leadership of the college does a really good job of teaching that reality and applying that reality.
- TS: Yes. So a pragmatic spirit on campus, do you think?
- SO: Absolutely.
- TS: You went to seminars for new presidents at Harvard and AASCU [American Association of State Colleges and Universities]. What stands out that you learned from going to those?
- SO: Well, you learn that the problems that you are facing at your university are being faced at many universities at the same time. You are not alone. It is a very difficult period to be in higher education, both politically and academically. I certainly have learned a lot more about higher ed now than I knew before that I had hoped would be able to be used to

teach appropriators the value of the money that they send to the University System of Georgia to educate our youth.

TS: Yes. By the way, as you went to these seminars, how many presidents came through the ranks of academia and how many, like you, came from legal backgrounds and public service?

SO: I went to two different programs, and I would say between a third and fourth were non-traditional.

TS: I know Lamar Alexander was president of the University of Tennessee at one time [1988-1991].

SO: Right.

TS: And Dwight D. Eisenhower was president of Columbia University [1948-1953]. Those are land grant and elite institutions. What did you find? Are presidents that come from outside of academia more likely to be at an elite institution, or a state college, or what?

SO: Candidly, I didn't find a set rule. There were a lot of lawyers. So as you look at those non-traditional presidents, a good percentage of them were lawyers. One or two of them actually had been chief legal counsel at the university before they then became president of the university. That surprised me. Several were alums that then came back to lead that institution after having very different vocations before becoming president.

TS: When you were chairman of the Cobb County Commission [2002-2010], how deeply were you involved in things at Kennesaw and Southern Poly?

SO: I would probably be at the KSU campus three or four times a year. I would probably be at the Southern Poly campus about twice a year.

TS: So not a lot, but some involvement?

SO: Right. I had served on the community advisory board here before. I probably attended more programs of the College of the Arts than any other college programs at that time. To me, what was so important was the fact that the prior presidents of both institutions were active in the community. They spent time off campus in the community, and I thought that was really important.

TS: Betty Siegel and Lisa [A.] Rossbacher?

SO: And Dan [Papp].

TS: All three? We have had incredible turnover in members of the president's cabinet and advisory council over the last year and a half.

SO: Right.

TS: A lot of this relates to the problems of last year. We still have the same vice presidents for academic affairs and student affairs, but many new faces in the business and legal areas and in development and the foundation and alumni and even athletics. Can you talk about what you look for, particularly in light of our situation last year, when you select top administrators?

SO: Let me answer your question in two parts. When I talk to prior presidents, they had walked into the position assuming they were making much more change than I did. I thought I was probably going to be changing about five chairs, but found I needed to change many more. The presidents that had previously been in higher education knew that they were going to be changing a lot of chairs when they first arrived at the institution. So while it has been a large percentage, it may still be less than those at like institutions when there is a new president. The second part is, it was clear that in pretty much every area of this university there were inadequate financial controls, policies, and procedures.

TS: Everywhere?

SO: Most. I'm not going to say everywhere.

TS: But most everywhere?

SO: And so as we have looked at filling many of those positions, I have overtly looked for leaders that have a prior history of working within budgets, of understanding how to put a budget together, and how to operate within a budget. For instance, our new athletics director [Milton Overton] comes with many years of experience in that budget area. I think that is really important for all these positions. So those leaders that were here that did better with budgets are the ones that are still here. The ones that were not paying attention in that area are generally some of the ones that are not here. You know, when you have almost 36,000 students, and if you are asked what your financial situation is like, you can't answer, "We have a positive balance." It needs a much deeper dive, and there were numerous areas of this university where there was no deeper dive. It is totally different from the academic side of the house. The academic side of the house was in good shape, is in good shape, is getting better ...

TS: Financially and everything else?

SO: Well, academically. Let's not go financially because, let's face it, they have infrastructure and resource issues.

TS: I guess one of the biggest shocks for me in all this last year is it seemed like every time you got a little two thousand dollar grant, you had so many audits that you spent half your time doing clerical work. I thought we were an institution that was up to speed on all those things, and I guess we found out otherwise.

SO: Let me suggest to you that the audit issues that were known when I came here were a fraction of the audit issues.

TS: Really?

SO: Yes.

TS: That's all you want to say about that?

SO: Yes, it was a small fraction.

TS: So we had major auditing problems?

SO: Major financial operational issues, yes. I'll give you an example. I had a meeting with the leadership of the library system. They did not have adequate funds to pay for all the online periodicals in their budget.

TS: Oh, they were buying them, but they didn't have the money to pay for them?

SO: No, just the annual renewals. They didn't have the funds in their budget for that because there was an individual at the university that, if you went up to his door, he would just put money in your account from his budget that had way too much money in it. So we weren't running on real budgets, which is unbelievable. For instance, when folks have gone up to me and said, "We need transparency in the budget process," absolutely, I agree. The first thing that we needed to do was to hire someone who could put that transparency in place—to put the appropriate policies in place, which we are doing as we speak. So by definition when you have a vice president of the university handing out hundreds of thousands of dollars to his favored departments, rather than assuring that departments had the monies they needed for their minimum requirements, that's a real problem. When I finished the meeting with the library system, I immediately reached out to our CBO [chief business officer]. I said, "Julie [Peterson], you need to be reaching out to David [Evans, assistant vice president and dean of library services]. They need to be having the funds to be able to have those necessary periodicals." And Julie did exactly that. In the new budget, the librarian has told me the funds are in his regular budget, as they should be. So just multiply that by the number of departments that have like issues. I was dealing the first six months here with issues that were on no one's radar when I came here.

TS: Have we made the personnel changes by now, or are there still some ...

SO: There are still some. I would like to say that we've made the vast majority, but there are still some.

TS: What about the Office of University Advancement & Development and the KSU Foundation?

SO: We had two different positions that didn't talk to each other and didn't share software together.

TS: You're talking about development and the foundation?

SO: Yes.

TS: They didn't talk to each other?

SO: They didn't talk to each other. They didn't share software together. It was a mess. Neither individual is still here.

TS: So the two are going to be coordinated better?

SO: The two are one.

TS: The two are now one?

SO: Right, along with alumni. I have included alumni in that triumvirate. This university has never put in place, in my opinion, the appropriate alumni infrastructure.

TS: Support for the alumni?

SO: Absolutely, for the alumni; so we're now working on doing that.

TS: Great.

SO: That's one of the areas, for instance, that no one talked about when I came here.

TS: As far as president's cabinet and so on, or ...

SO: Or audits or operational.

TS: We have a few alumni on the KSU Foundation, but the foundation has historically been community folks—Tommy Holder [Thomas M. Holder] and Michael [J.] Coles and folks like that. Do you foresee a time when the majority of our foundation will be people that graduated from here?

SO: Yes. The irony to date is it has been the people who didn't graduate from here who have given the most. You know, the Norm Radows [Norman J. Radow], the Tommy Holders, the Michael Coles.

TS: Sure, individuals that didn't come here at all.

SO: Right. But, in a healthy mix, you would expect the majority of the foundation to be alums of this university who generously give to this university.

TS: Of course, we didn't give bachelor's degrees until 1980, so ...

SO: That's clearly part of it. I'm not criticizing the alums at all. In fact, if you look at the percentage of alums that give, it's a healthy percentage. It just doesn't equate to the numbers necessary for the improvements that we need to have.

TS: And those that graduated in the 1980s or 1990s are probably in senior positions in their companies by this time.

SO: Right, but I think we have a healthy group of alums that are supporting the university. It would be my hope that within ten years the mix in the foundation would be different.

TS: Half and half or what?

SO: [Half should be alums] at a minimum.

TS: Within ten years?

SO: Yes.

TS: That's excellent! So I guess what you are saying is that we don't have all the problems from last year behind us yet, but are we getting close, do you think?

SO: Well, we're still finding some ...

TS: Still finding some?

SO: Still finding some ...

TS: Like what?

SO: But less and less. To be honest, it would be inappropriate for me to comment. I think we're in a much healthier position both fiscally and operationally than we were a year ago, but we're not at a point where I should say everything's fine because that would not be honest.

TS: To what degree do you think Dan Papp was responsible for these problems?

SO: I've known Dan a long, long time. I like Dan. I respect Dan. I think that the bigger issue, frankly, was changing the mix of leadership at the university consistent with the growth and changes to the university. I think Dan had great vision. I think some of the folks that were here were not able to move forward with Dan's vision. You know, it is very difficult to tell someone you should have fired folks that you brought here. No one likes to fire anyone. So I am in no way, shape, or form seeking to be critical of any predecessor. Sometimes, that new blood in the president's position makes it easier to change some of those chairs. But I think it was clear that numerous people in positions of

leadership were not up to the challenge. [On the other hand], I've worked a lot with the vice president for student affairs [Kathleen "K. C." White]. She's been here now about two or three years [since July 1, 2015]. I think Dr. White does a great job. I think she is really committed to make the necessary changes. She is someone who Dr. Papp brought here who I think was a great choice for the university and I think will do an outstanding job for the university.

TS: Houston Davis said that he thought our problem was a culture of accountability or lack of a culture of accountability.

SO: Well, clearly he's right.

TS: That seems to be what you are saying isn't it?

SO: Absolutely. The fact that it was okay to look the other way is not acceptable. I think at a given point there was just a level of frustration that folks don't want the ship moved even though it needs to move.

TS: Yes.

SO: I think one of the bigger challenges for the university today is lack of a consistent vision. For instance, if you look at Georgia State University, when they made their huge rise, they chose to lead in several areas. It brought in with that acclaim significant additional financial resources, which assisted the overall university in more than [just] those several areas. If I were to go up to our faculty today and say, "Tell me the three or four areas we should prioritize," I don't think you can accomplish it.

TS: You don't think they could give you three areas or you don't think we could do it if they could identify the priorities?

SO: I think that they would fight over what those areas are.

TS: Oh, sure. I meant to ask you somewhere in the interview about the next strategic plan ... the next five-year plan. Maybe this would be a good time.

SO: Well [Timothy] Tim Blumentritt [director of the president's emerging global scholars program and associate professor of management] is leading a large part of that. Great guy! I've known him for years. The process is moving on time. Both the provost [W. Ken Harmon] and I have a lot of confidence in Tim's leadership in that area. But I think part of it is similar to what I learned at both the AASCU and Harvard programs. Universities are much better at developing plans than instituting those plans. So one of the things that Tim is paying very close attention to is that the plan is worthless unless it provides the opportunity for us to actually accomplish what is desired. You can't bind it and put it on a shelf and smile. You have to fulfill the obligations within it.

TS: Sure.

- SO: And universities overall are much better with binding the plan than fulfilling the obligations.
- TS: What is your vision for the next five years?
- SO: Well, I think we need to prioritize. I think we need to do what Georgia State did so well. I think we need to look at those areas of the university that overtly excel and to promote those areas. For instance, is there anyone who honestly thinks that a millennial chooses a college based on a worthless billboard? And God knows how many hundreds of thousands of dollars ...
- TS: We've got a lot of them.
- SO: We are not paying for any billboards now. If you see one now, it is because they haven't sold the space.
- TS: Okay.
- SO: We have a new associate vice president for marketing and communications [Alice Wheelwright] that starts next Monday, December 4. I'm really looking for a lot of leadership from her because we need, in working with faculty and staff, to find those areas to promote and to promote them in a way that the millennials pay attention, which I gather is social media and not a billboard.
- TS: Probably so.
- SO: Now that is not to say that we should not have specific marketing for programs like our outstanding EMBA [Executive MBA] program [rated first in Georgia and ninth in the world in 2017 according to *CEO Magazine*]. But as we're looking at undergraduate admissions, billboards aren't it. We need to be willing as a university to promote not only the university overall, but specific programs of excellence, and then we will accomplish much more. I'll give you another example. I was at a program probably about nine months ago, and this mother came up to me with her daughter and said, "My daughter wants to be a nurse, and we would really like to go to the School of Nursing at KSU, but we don't think that the academics are high enough." I said, "Ma'am, do you understand that in a typical year to get into the [WellStar] School of Nursing, your daughter needs a GPA here between 3.8 and 4.0?" And she said, "I had no idea." Shame on us!
- TS: Shame on us that the public doesn't know how high the standards are?
- SO: Right. So I'm really looking forward to a new associate VP of marketing and communications leading that change. For instance, I want that position to have an advisory board, which consists of many faculty, many staff, many community leaders, and many alumni who have a marketing background so that we get their expertise. I mean, we have a marketing department. Why are we not using them?

- TS: Good question.
- SO: I'm hoping we will with our new associate vice president.
- TS: Right. And you mentioned social media ...
- SO: Absolutely. We were in the dark ages on social media when I came here. We're using social media a lot more. Tammy DeMel who heads communications [assistant vice president of communications] has done a really nice job of improving our social media in a short period of time.
- TS: Well, let me ask you to talk about the consolidation of the two campuses. You inherited a consolidated campus. I think we are still working to blend the cultures together of a liberal arts and an engineering school. I just wonder where you think we are in that process.
- SO: I think we're much further along. You know, when the consolidation was announced [in 2013], Southern Poly had about six thousand students. That campus now has about eight thousand five hundred students. I think many of their alums that were adverse to the consolidation are seeing the fruits of the consolidation. The [Southern Polytechnic] College of Engineering [and Engineering Technology] has had huge growth. The College of Architecture and Construction Management and the College of Computing and Software Engineering are doing great. The applications are up. The acceptances are up. Two of the last three years the recognized state engineering student came from KSU, not Georgia Tech. Last year one of the leading engineering associations recognized a KSU faculty member. I think that many of the folks that were sour on the consolidation are now having second thoughts of joining us. I'm getting emails from some of those alums. Some of our KSU Foundation board members that heretofore were foundation board members at Southern Poly are getting those phone calls and emails too. So I think that we are in a much better place than we were a year ago. Now frankly that's no credit to me. That's credit to the faculty, staff, and students here that are working hard to make that work.
- TS: It certainly hasn't hurt enrollment to be consolidated.
- SO: We had a 17 percent increase last year in the College of Engineering and over 10 percent this year.
- TS: So it sounds like being consolidated has made the Marietta campus more attractive to students.
- SO: Yes. It's actually funny because some of the students tell me on the Marietta campus that it gives them the best of both [campuses]. They get to take classes on a smaller campus, but they're part of a bigger university.
- TS: How many people are riding BOB [Big Owl Bus] back and forth?

SO: Candidly, I just know we are spending millions of dollars on the buses.

TS: Are those buses packed or half filled?

SO: We are constantly needing more buses.

TS: Are we?

SO: Yes. We now have a park and ride lot at [Six Flags] White Water.

TS: Oh, really?

SO: Which is an additional \$300,000 plus expense this year.

TS: I didn't know that. I've seen cars parked there, but I didn't know they were our students. That's interesting. I know that the savings from consolidation—Dan Papp didn't like the word savings; he called it redirected funds—have gone into a lot of things like more advisors and more tenured track faculty positions and such as that. I think the last interview I did with Dan Papp, he said that we were redirecting about \$5 million a year as a result of consolidation. I just wonder where is the money going now? Is it still going in those same areas?

SO: Let me answer that two ways. So far this year we've added twelve more advisors and twenty more faculty members. We still need more advisors. We still need a lot more faculty. But one of the things we found out with the consolidation was that the KSU campus was frankly more technologically sound with regard to infrastructure than the Southern Poly campus.

TS: Which is surprising, isn't it?

SO: So we have needed to expend millions of dollars for safety features, for IT features, and lab features, and we are still in that process at the Marietta campus.

TS: Those are redirected funds going into those areas?

SO: Absolutely. For instance, there were parts of that campus when the consolidation first occurred that were dark at night with inadequate lighting. So we have a multi-phased plan to keep adding more lights, not just there, but also on the Kennesaw campus, but predominately at the Marietta campus. A lot of the IT infrastructure was totally outdated with software that was no longer maintained. We had labs that needed immediate assistance to assure student safety. So the students over there have been the beneficiary of a lot of needed improvements.

TS: I know one of the concerns on the Southern Polytechnic campus was that before 1980 they were part of Georgia Tech and felt like a stepchild. They were afraid that was going to happen again, but obviously it hasn't.

- SO: I would like to think that they all understand they are in a better place now. If some of them don't, I would love to talk to them because we need to get each and every student on that campus believing in the total university.
- TS: You've talked about what the Marietta campus gained from consolidation. What have we gained on the Kennesaw campus from the consolidation?
- SO: I think that the faculty and staff [of the two campuses] learn from each other. You know, there were policies at Southern Poly that were superior to policies at KSU, and vice versa. So through looking at how each university ran, you hope to take the best from both. Also there are programs where one faculty can get assistance from the other. I'll give you an example. My understanding is that KSU's College of Science and Math did not have a physics major. Now there is a lot of instruction in physics as a result of the consolidation. It's my understanding that several other programs are taking the best from both campuses and making stronger programs for the students. So I think there have been a whole series of gains. Whenever you go to a shared governance meeting, you immediately hear, "Well, this is the way we did it," and "This is the way we do it." There's a healthy discussion of, "Okay, let's take the best from both." So I think the consolidation has been very positive for both the old KSU and Southern Poly, but I think we need to be mindful of each and every opportunity to constantly look for buy-ins from both campuses.
- TS: I know when we began planning the consolidation, I started going down there and doing interviews on the Marietta campus. I was stunned by the fact that I have been here since 1968, and yet I knew so little about the Southern Polytechnic campus and the faculty members down there. I think one of the positives from my perspective is just getting to know folks on the Marietta campus.
- SO: Absolutely—some great faculty and great leadership! I've really tried hard to reach out to the faculty and leadership there because I think there was still that sense of concern about consolidation. I think Dr. Papp tried really hard to allay those fears, but I think it is also the norm that it takes five years to fully allay those fears. So I think Dr. Papp was committed to do that and was doing it, but it was going to take additional time.
- TS: One thing I have heard on the Marietta campus is that they were very happy when you became president because you did not come from the Kennesaw campus.
- SO: Well the other thing, I try to walk around both campuses. I don't like to just sit behind a desk. And that's fun. It's always fun when you get to talk to the students or to the faculty and staff in an informal environment. I'll give you an example. The beginning of the semester I looked on my Twitter account. *The Sentinel* [student newspaper] was sort of teasing me that they were offering free coffee with that week's free newspaper. They asked whether Sam Olens was going or not going. Well, I figured the heck with that. If they are going to sit there and tease me, I'm showing up. So I had a meeting with Dr. [K. C.] White [the vice president for student affairs]. I said, "Come on. We're going to go get a free cup of coffee." And we walked over there, talked to the students at *The*

Sentinel for about twenty minutes, and walked up and finished our meeting. So I look for those opportunities to reach out to the students.

- TS: Great! Speaking of students, I did a little statistical analysis the other day of the demographic changes on our campuses in the last ten years from fall of 2007 to fall of 2017. It was really stunning! I knew how much we had grown, but the growth in non-Hispanic white student population has been minimal—only 893 over ten years' time. The two campuses together had 25,067 students ten years ago. We have 35,846 now. So we've grown by 10,779 students, but less than one thousand of the growth has been non-Hispanic white. I wonder if you've been noticing that kind of change, and whether you have any thoughts about what it means for KSU's future.
- SO: Yes, I think it's great! We've worked really hard with University College and their first-year programs to assure that each and every student that comes here has the necessary resources for success. We need to do more. We're continuing to look for ways to do more. One example is the recent Coca-Cola Foundation grant [of \$1.25 million, announced November 6, 2017, to provide scholarships and wraparound services for first-generation and underrepresented STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) students]. Another is the agreement we signed with Achieve Atlanta [a program to help graduates of Atlanta Public Schools succeed in colleges and technical schools]. We need to look for opportunities to assist each and every student. We have a high percentage of first-generation students. I was a first-generation student. First-generation students in general require more resources to succeed, and I think we have an obligation to assist them in that regard.
- TS: Yes.
- SO: I did not have that assistance. I wish I had. So I think it's really important. I think the other statistical analysis that you should do is with regard to transfers in and transfers out. For instance, last year we had, I believe, 210 students transfer from KSU to UGA. I would suggest to you that it used to be a lot more.
- TS: Oh, absolutely.
- SO: We had over 2300 students last year transfer to KSU—the most in the university system. Ten years ago you wouldn't have found that the USG [University System of Georgia] institution with the most transfers to it was KSU. So that's telling you that we are becoming a destination school, which bodes really, really well for the future of this university.
- TS: Yes, for a long time, even after we were a four-year school, people still used us as junior college.
- SO: Absolutely. So now you have all these students seeking to come here after they started elsewhere, which is a very positive sign.

- TS: Any thoughts on how that has come about? What has made us a destination university? Is it having a football program, or what do you think is attracting people straight out of high school to Kennesaw or people that start elsewhere and decide they want to come here?
- SO: I think that football is only three years old. So football can take a little of the credit, not a lot. I think there is some understanding that the academics have improved here—that the quality of instruction is very, very good, and that this institution has programs as good as any in our state and some that are better. I'll give you an example that I find really surprising. We have the only PhD in the university system in analytics and data science. It's in its third year. The last two years we have been ranked in the top fifty in the country for data analytics. So think about that—three years old and the last two we were in the top fifty in the country!
- TS: Wow!
- SO: That's amazing. That speaks so highly of Jennifer [L.] Priestley [associate dean of the Graduate College and director of the PhD in Analytics and Data Science program] and her faculty that were here before the PhD program. That PhD program has given us a marketing tool to reach out even further.
- TS: How big is the student enrollment in the analytics and data science PhD program?
- SO: Well, they take five students a year. Last year they had, I believe, eighty applicants for five positions. You have to be darn sharp to get in.
- TS: Yes.
- SO: Which is the way it should be.
- TS: I heard you make a nice speech to the retirees on October 6 [2017] at the Brunch on the Bricks. You were sharing your vision for KSU. One of the things that you dealt with had to do with making college more affordable for today's students and taking care of students with financial needs. It seems to me like every speech you make you say something about that. So I assume it's something that you're really passionate about.
- SO: Once again, I was first gen. I had scholarships. I had loans. I didn't have any family that wrote a single check. Sometimes it's called the last mile. Sometimes it's simply called need-based scholarships. Sometimes that \$700 to \$1500 scholarship is the difference between a student leaving college and staying in college. I thought the KSU Foundation, unfortunately, got into a place where they were looking too much at bricks and mortar and not enough at financial aid. So I have worked hard with [foundation leaders] Jo Anne Chitty and James [P.] Dunn and also now Trent Turk [Trenton D. Turk] to put more energy into need-based scholarships for our students because that is so important for their success. Ways that we can similarly reduce cost we need to do. Encouraging faculty to

use cheaper books, to use books that are available online for much less cost, etc., I think are all to the benefit of our students.

TS: How is Affordable Learning Georgia [a USG initiative to promote student success by providing affordable textbook alternatives] doing?

SO: I think it's doing well, but it further needs to expand. I think it is a very admirable program. I think there are a lot of resources within it., but it needs to be about three times larger.

TS: That would be nice to keep those book costs down.

SO: Anything we can do in that regard. I know, for instance, Kasey Helton, assistant vice president of auxiliary services, is really working with a lot of publishers to see about ways to reduce the cost of those materials

TS: Great. You've also mentioned the recent statistics about how our alumni do in the workforce in terms of income five or ten years out. Can you say something about that?

SO: Absolutely. A group pay scale ranked us 5 out of 41 for institutions in the state of Georgia for salary. Georgia Tech, Emory University, the University of Georgia, and Morehouse College are the top four, and we are fifth. I think that's a real positive sign for our university. What is also interesting is when you look under specific areas, our MBA students make a little bit less than UGA for year one, but they make more at year five.

TS: Wow. I guess they're well prepared for the job.

SO: I think it is an outstanding program. I think the Coles College of Business does a remarkable job.

TS: Yes.

SO: And incidentally too when you talk minorities, our master's in accounting is about 30 percent African American, much higher than the national norm. That really helps us with the big accounting firms because they have a huge shortage of minority CPAs. So we're able to use our minority base to the benefit of those students to get a great job.

TS: You've talked about advisement and some of the things that we've done to try to keep students in school. You mentioned making sure students can get the classes that they need to graduate and providing drug counseling and what have you. But I've got a question for you. I can't see much improvement in KSU's graduation rate over the last four or five years. I just recently looked up the six-year graduation rate for the fall 2007 cohort of first-time full-time students, and 42 percent graduated within six years. For the fall 2011 cohort it is 41.3 percent. I know part of this is from consolidation, but it doesn't look like we've improved much at least in the last five or six years in our graduation rate.

I wondered if you think that's true, and do you have any thoughts of what we need to be doing more to improve the graduation rate.

SO: First of all I agree with you. Secondly, that 42 percent is an artificial number because it doesn't include those students that start here and graduate elsewhere or those students who start elsewhere and graduate here. For instance, when I tell you that we had over 2300 students transfer to KSU this year, the federal number doesn't include anything other than the number of students that started and finished here. So our numbers are actually in the 60s if you want to use accurate information. If students spend two years at Georgia State and two years or three years here and graduate from here, they should count as a graduate. If students come here for two years and got to UGA and graduate, they should count as a graduate. The federal government doesn't include any of them. It's considered a zero, as if none of them graduated anywhere. That is totally fallacious. Having said that, even if you assume the accurate numbers in the 60s, that's not sufficient. We need to do much better. Now, what do we need to do to improve? Well, once again I think we need many more advisors and many more faculty members. Our number of advisors is still insufficient. We're now buying software. Georgia State University has been a leader in assisting those advisors and assuring greater success for its students. We are doing a lot of it this academic year. We need to be doing more of it. We're too reliant on part-time faculty. The studies show that the full-time faculty members are easier for our students to meet with during office hours. Now that doesn't mean that we still won't need a lot of part-time faculty. Of course, we will. But we have to hire many more advisors and many more full-time faculty members, the sooner the better.

TS: Where is the money going to come from?

SO: I was hoping you were going to help.

TS: Okay.

SO: That's the \$64,000 question.

TS: Consolidate with somebody else maybe.

SO: No, no! But part of it, frankly, is always looking for savings. You know, every institution has waste. Right?

TS: Right.

SO: We all have waste. Do we do a good job at seeking the appropriate areas for savings and spending dollars where needed?

TS: You had mentioned earlier about cutting down or at least controlling our enrollment and maybe capping undergraduate enrollment around 33,000. Is that the goal?

SO: Right, yes.

TS: I've never quite understood what the fixed-seat enrollment model is. Can you explain that?

SO: We admit roughly 5,100 first-time freshmen a year. The idea is we're going to do early admit. We're going to keep a waiting list. So if you meet the minimum standard, it is not an automatic admission. That will permit the university to better gauge where new faculty members are needed. For instance, when we had the 17 percent increase in enrollment in the engineering college a year ago, that was hard to deal with under our old system at that time. It's much easier in a fixed-seat system to say, "Okay, we need 'x' number more engineering faculty, and we need them hired now." It will permit a better experience for the students. We can take the data from who is being admitted and mix that better with the classes that are being offered.

TS: But you do the hiring of faculty the year before. Where is the money coming from to get those additional faculty members?

SO: I would suggest to you that we could have been doing hiring quicker than we were. We were overly conservative. Now, yes, you want to be conservative, but we were overly conservative in hiring decisions. When I talked to the university system office, they were surprised at how overly conservative we were handling the hiring of faculty.

TS: Oh, really?

SO: Yes.

TS: So what you're saying is, if we see a 17 percent growth in engineering students, but flat growth in history, we make sure that the new faculty positions we have are in engineering. Is that right?

SO: Separate from the requirements for General Education.

TS: Okay. I wonder if we could talk about partnerships with the community and how they benefit the institution. Obviously, with your elected positions, you have far more community contacts than any other new president could expect to have that was coming from somewhere else into Cobb County. What are we doing in terms of partnerships that are new since you got here?

SO: I've been keeping Ana Baida [executive director, Department of Career Planning and Development] and her folks really busy. We have had a lot of meetings, a lot of breakfasts, a lot of lunches, with leading corporations for additional internship and recruitment opportunities. I have sought to demonstrate the value of our students to those companies because you need to show them the value before you ask them for a check. More and more of those companies come up to me and tell me that those interns and those recent hires are as good as they've gotten, if not better than those from other

institutions in Georgia, and it makes them want to do more with us. So I think the first stage is demonstrating the value our students bring to their companies. Asking for money is the follow up in that regard. There are a lot of new businesses that were not recruiting here before or were not seeking our students for internships that are now actively working with [the Department of] Career Planning and Development. I think that bodes really well for our students in the future.

TS: Part of the job of the president of a public university is to be an intermediary between the community and the campus. I think that has been a historic role in America. America really innovated the college presidency. If your role is to some degree to explain the campus to the community and the community to the campus, let me just ask you, how hard has it been for you during this last year to play that role?

SO: I think it is exceedingly difficult because I don't think that we're at that place where that's comfortable for the faculty. I think there are very few faculty members, for instance, that routinely seek to do civic talks to the community. You've always been active in the community, you and your wife [Kathleen Sherlock Scott]. That's the minority of faculty members that have been active in the community. I think it is needed for more faculty to seek that opportunity.

TS: Well, I guess that was really what I was going to ask you next. What do you think the faculty needs to know about the community that maybe it has forgotten or hasn't ever learned?

SO: Candidly, I think it is more important for the faculty to teach the community the value of the university. For instance, Roger Tutterow [professor of economics] does talks all over the place. I think we need to encourage more of our faculty to be doing that. Humayun Zafar [associate professor of information security and assurance], I know, regularly does a lot of talks, for instance in cyberspace. I would love to have more and more of our faculty speaking to the community each and every day because I think the number one emphasis is us teaching the community what we have to offer. That then will provide a reciprocal arrangement.

TS: George [H.] Beggs [charter faculty member and former dean of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences] used to say we were public servants. I think a lot of faculty members dispute that, but we are on the public payroll.

SO: I agree with George, and I agree with your comment.

TS: How do you think we could get faculty involved more in speaking and doing things in the community?

SO: We've been reaching out to faculty. We've increased our participation in several chambers [of commerce], and with that participation came appointments on committees. We've actively sought to encourage some of our faculty to be engaged in those committees. So I think it's a process. You don't do it overnight. You do it over

numerous years. I'll give you an example: Kathryn [L.] Bedette [academic engagement coordinator and associate professor of architecture], in January will be president of AIA Georgia [American Institute of Architects Georgia]. What a great opportunity, not only for Kathryn, but our College of Architecture and Construction Management. So those faculty that take leadership positions in the community, whether it's in their professional area or other areas, provide a great gain for the university.

TS: Yes. I was always impressed with Jim Fausett [James Gantt Fausett, professor emeritus of architecture] from the Southern Poly campus that was out there working on projects in the community—still does, even though he's retired. You've talked before about faculty equity issues. Can you talk a little bit about that?

SO: We've put money aside in the budget to deal as a first-year effort in faculty and staff equity. We're now in about the fourth phase of looking over those numbers. I think at times we let the perfect get in the way of the very good. We just hired a new head of IR [Institutional Research], and I'm hoping that as soon as she comes to campus we'll have another set of eyes, so we can actually start writing some checks.

TS: Are the faculty equity issues primarily because new people come in making more money than those that are already here, or something else?

SO: Let's talk faculty and staff equity rather than just one. I think it's a combination: it's inversion; it's compression; it's new hires; it's consolidation; it's everything. So it's a very complicated mathematical area. I hate to see the perfect get in the way of the very good, but let's face it, that's going to be a multi-year effort. We didn't get here overnight. We can't get out of that equity issue overnight.

TS: Maybe to wind things up, I only have one other major topic that I wanted to talk about today, and that is the growth in the graduate programs. We're an R3 [Research 3] now. Do you foresee down the road Kennesaw moving toward being an R1, particularly as we add more doctoral programs?

SO: R3 was organic growth. I think in all likelihood one day the university will be an R1 through organic growth, but I think the alleged tension between the teaching faculty and research faculty is a non-issue. The university needs excellent teaching faculty as well as excellent research faculty. I believe that we should let it continue the way it has, organically. If the time is appropriate, it will occur. But once again the students' success is the greater issue.

TS: What future doctoral programs do you envision?

SO: That's a bad question for me to answer because the university system doesn't like you to cover that before it is in front of them. They don't like those surprises. I would suggest that in many ways we need to be less interested in new [doctorates], in quantity, and more interested in quality. I think that we have programs that we over-subsidize. We have programs that are in huge demand, and we're not satisfying that demand. We have

programs where the demand isn't there, and we should stop. So I think first we need to clean internally the right mix in the graduate college and to improve the quality throughout, just as in the undergraduate, and then to look at new.

TS: If I can't ask you about new doctoral programs, let me ask the question another way. I think one of the goals, as an institution matures, is that you develop master's programs to equate with the undergraduate programs that are already in place. Like, we don't have a master's in history yet. Do you see us filling in more of the gaps between the undergraduate and the doctoral programs?

SO: Once again, I would tell you that that's part of the vision process for this university to prioritize what we want to do. We do not have the resources to be everything to everybody. We need to choose those areas of growth. We have an excellent dean of the graduate college, Mike Dishman. He does not lack for energy or vision, and I believe the various colleges need to work with him and the provost to work on those areas that would bring the most fruit to the university and its students.

TS: Well, I'm hoping that somewhere down the road we can do another interview with you and go back and talk about some of the things you did before you became president of Kennesaw State. Also we haven't really talked about some of the recent controversies that I think might be appropriate a year from now when we can look at them through the rearview mirror. But thank you very much for this interview.

SO: My pleasure, sir, thank you.

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