

9-4-2003

H. William (Bill) Heller : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Yael V. Greenberg

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Scholar Commons Citation

University of South Florida Libraries. Florida Studies Center. Oral History Program.; Heller, H. William; and Greenberg, Yael V., "H. William (Bill) Heller : USF 50th (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project: interview by Yael V. Greenberg" (2003). *Campus Biographies-All Items*. 40.
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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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Date of Interview: September 4, 2003
Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date of Edit: January 7, 2004

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg
Location of Interview: Tampa
Campus Library
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Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Arrival in St. Petersburg

Dr. Heller arrived August 5, 1992. He had many colleagues and friends in special education at the St. Petersburg campus, including Jim Paul and Lynn Lavelly. Bill Katzenmyer, a longtime friend, was the dean. When considering the St. Petersburg system before coming here, Dr. Heller concluded that it had a good education program in a county with about 1,000,000 people. It also looked like a campus that was “poised for great growth, great potential and it was located in a beautiful spot.”

Howard Hinesley, superintendent in Pinellas County Schools, had been a student of Dr. Heller’s at the University of Alabama. A combination of people and the campus’s potential drew him here.

Dr. Heller had been Dean of education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for thirteen years. He felt like he needed a change. Many questioned his choice to go to a regional campus. He considered it a good decision because of the potential of the campus, the ability to interact with colleagues that he knew he liked and the reputation of the University of South Florida as a university that was growing.

Prior to arrival, what did he hear about USF?

The doctoral programs were expanding, the medical, engineering, and education programs were of “high quality” and arts and sciences was a good program and broad based. The university was an urban and commuter school, much like UNC Charlotte. These types of universities had certain characteristics that he liked. The students tend to be first generation students and they have their priorities straight. They are willing to make educational sacrifices and they need to work and support families as well. These students still manage all this, making them “a very unique kind of student and a kind of student that I like.” USF also had a history of success in research. Dr. Heller reviewed a lot of proposals and USF’s always did very well when compared with other schools.

He was also very impressed with their fundraising. “The endowment for a university this young, at the level it was when I looked at it, was very impressive.” Most state universities are assisted by their states, but not supported by them, so a state university needs to get supplemental support from grants and donors and USF had these things,

which is especially good considering the relative youth of the university. “When you look at what the accomplishments are at this campus for fifty-years it’s pretty significant.”

Description of St. Petersburg Campus in 1992

There were fourteen acres encompassed in the campus deed when Dr. Heller first got there. He wanted to try and enlarge the area because there were certain expansionist plans that they were considering and in any planning there was a necessity for some of the area adjacent to the campus.

Dr. Heller went to the city council and asked the man in charge of zoning, Steve Kurcan, how the campus could get more land. Extra land was designed for the campus, but the official deeding had never taken place because the school, city and state all had to work together. The city deeds land over to the state and the State Improvement Trust Fund owns the land. State universities are actually residents leasing area on state property, the property is owned by the state, not the school. Dr. Heller asked some attorneys to help speed up the process. Roy Harrell was a local attorney who did title work, and he was kind enough to do some pro-bono work for Dr. Heller. The St. Petersburg campus expanded from fourteen acres to forty-six acres in about a year. They were then able to see the boundaries they would have and if the school wanted to go to the city to get clearance to build a new building; the state actually had the title to the land.

Initial expansion plans

The campus was only an upper level campus, junior and senior level classes and some graduate level courses. They wanted to “build depth in those programs.” These programs were under the authority of the colleges in Tampa and the St. Petersburg programs couldn’t be built without a positive relationship and the approval of the colleges in Tampa.

At St. Petersburg their colleges included arts and sciences and education but because the programs were limited the school wanted to expand the programs and expand the depth in the programs. They were offering almost exclusively evening classes, there were very few courses offered before 5:00 pm. Dr. Heller describes a night campus as a “lighted schoolhouse.” At that time there were only one or two sections of a course. If a student could not get into a course one semester the class would not be available the second semester, so students would often have to wait a year. This meant that many students had to come to Tampa. The goal was to “build some breadth and some depth in our programming.”

There was a community introduction for Dr. Heller when he was first hired; President Borkowski was there. During Dr. Heller’s speech at the introduction, he remarked that there seemed to be no reason that the St. Petersburg campus had never become a four-year university. One of the goals they should have is to establish St. Petersburg as a four-year university. Because of their upper-level status they couldn’t recruit from high schools adequately. Most of the time students who came to USF St. Pete either went to

USF's Tampa campus or St. Petersburg Junior College for their first two years. USF St. Petersburg relied on a supply of students from St. Petersburg Junior College.

As Dr. Heller saw it, the campus's ability to grow would be continue to be hindered by its status as a upper level college. They needed to get freshman into their programs. At some point they wanted and needed to get status as a four-year university.

The St. Petersburg community and city had always treated the campus very well. The city gave them all of their property for the campus. They planned to try very hard to make a good relationship and partnership with their city and their neighborhood. These partnerships would give them the ability to get things done that they might not have been able to get done if they did not have this good relationship.

Relationship with Tampa Campus

To interact with the Tampa campus was sometimes a difficult adjustment. Some of the departments were very good to the St. Petersburg campus and very accommodating, while other departments were a little less accommodating. There were issues with power and this interaction led to some level of ill will. Dr. Heller's position was that "we are all in the same business, we all want to serve the students of the Tampa Bay Region, we're all the University of South Florida." Dr. Heller believed that if "you grow the University of South Florida at St. Petersburg, you grow the university, every one of those students becomes an alumni." Some departments may have believed that St. Petersburg was pillaging their enrollments to serve the St. Petersburg campus, but the university was meant to serve all of the Tampa Bay area. This was difficult if some people at the Tampa campus felt that the St. Petersburg campus was a separate entity. Since Dr. Heller was Dean at St. Petersburg he would meet with the Council of Deans in Tampa and try to work out some of these issues. Unfortunately much of the difficulty was tied to departmental politics. Some people believed that regional campuses held a second-class status. Dr. Heller tried to recruit faculty that could be interchangeable; if they wanted to go to the Tampa campus they would be capable of the switch. Likewise, he wanted the Tampa campus to be able to send professors to St. Petersburg without any problems. They wanted uniform standards in faculty and program quality. It was difficult from time to time, they didn't have departments or colleges independent of Tampa. Issues of control were difficult to deal with; some departments in Tampa were great, specifically criminal justice and geography. These departments would rotate meetings and make accommodations. Rather than demand that all meetings be at the Tampa campus, they would have some in Tampa and some in St. Petersburg. There were a lot of good relationships in the education department because there were a lot of faculty members that came from Tampa to St. Petersburg. There was an occasional feeling that these people had been "kicked out of the nest," but most of the transfers were by choice and they were and remained good faculty members, regardless of campus. A regional campus, at that time, must deal with a lot of decisions being made for them, without regard for the regional campuses input or opinion.

What is unique about the St. Petersburg Campus?

The campus really wanted to be community oriented; not just oriented toward the city of St. Petersburg, but also toward all of Pinellas County. They also wanted to be invitational. Recently Dr. Heller has been elected to be chair of the Faculty Council at St. Petersburg. This is indicative of the good relationships and the attempt to build an invitational campus. He tried to let the staff know that it didn't matter who a visitor was, staff interaction with an individual should be remembered as a very positive experience. Many times a person would be lost on the St. Petersburg campus, maybe looking for the Salvador Dali Museum, and staff was encouraged to help them in a manner that would reflect well on the university. Dr. Heller got many letters from people who received very courteous and friendly help from faculty members on campus. People were encouraged to treat everyone who came to the campus as important. The campus was small and they really grew to care about one another. When someone on campus was hurt in some way, they all hurt and when someone on campus achieved something, they all felt pride. It was almost a family atmosphere, very invitational and very community oriented.

If the community needed them, the campus would provide whatever they could. The wanted to be "a neighborhood that belongs to everybody." They did some things to make the campus unique; they put pink dye into the cement when the sidewalks were poured making colorful walks. They installed round globes for lighting, in order to make the school lighting unique. Many visitors have commented that this type of lighting would never survive on other campuses. The St. Petersburg campus has lost some of the globe lighting to weather, but never to vandalism and the reason why is because "it's everybody's neighborhood." Community organizations were always told that they were welcome on the campus and if they need to use the campus it will be available. The campus is on the harbor and they built a sidewalk with tables so the community almost has another park for general use. The campus was shared with anyone in the community and as a result, everyone in St. Petersburg feels as if it is "their" campus and they love it.

First impressions of President Borkowski

Dr. Heller really liked him. There are two things he remembers specifically: he was very fair and very "warm and personable." His wife Kaye was also very memorable. Dr. Heller had only met her once, at his interview. Later, at the faculty orientation, she was at one of the luncheons; she remembered and welcomed him to the University of South Florida. She and her husband were very good people and enjoyed people. President Borkowski was a musician but it seemed that he enjoyed sharing the music and talents more than performing. He was a "positive person for me and I always felt treated me fairly."

Dr. Heller's vision of the campus upon arrival

Many people warned him that regional campuses were difficult because of control issues. Dr. Heller clearly viewed the future of the school as being a four-year, residential campus with uniqueness in programming from the Tampa campus. They had a great marine science program. They were across the street from the Poynter Institute, making the possibility of a mass communications program more evident. Ray Arsenault was there, he was a great historian and they decided to talk to the Florida Humanities Council to

bring the Florida Center for Teachers to Campus because that would help them with teacher education. He believed they could be unique in education, history and Florida studies, and business.

Dr. Heller didn't "want to be everything to everybody" but he felt that mass communications, business, education, and some arts and sciences should be strong, along with marine sciences and environmental sciences. They had a strong college of engineering and public health, so they decided to bring back nursing because they were near All-Children's and Bayfront Hospitals.

He also wanted to encourage the invitational aspect and a certain amount of campus autonomy. They wanted to stay with USF, but remain autonomous. There were some legislators that wanted to become a separate university, but there are too many benefits of being in the USF system. There are gains in purchasing, curriculum, competition, and replication of programs, plus the name looks good on a diploma. USF St. Petersburg had a lot of potential and Dr. Heller envisioned a "small university, part of the larger University of South Florida system." Of course there was a certain amount of autonomy necessary because certain decisions are made in Tampa that might not fit the needs of St. Petersburg.

Autonomy at USF St. Petersburg

Dr. Heller believes that autonomy should be considered on a numeric scale (from zero to something). Total autonomy to some means total separation. Dr. Heller believes that a lot of autonomy is good, but it is also important to be part of a bigger operation. The major question regards decision-making abilities of satellite campus. Should the other campuses have to call the home campus every time a decision is going to be made? Or do some people have the authority make decisions. There may be differences in decisions between the satellite campus and the home campus. The person in charge of the campus should be allowed to make decisions independently of the home campus and be responsive to faculty, staff and student's needs. People in charge of regional campuses should report to a president who is in charge of the entire USF system. The campus head works autonomously in making many decisions, but they work for and report to the president of the university. This is how there is a negotiation in regional autonomy. All different campuses have different needs and president's need to understand that different campus heads make decisions based on the needs for that particular campus.

St. Petersburg has their own colleges, some fiscal independence, and organizational independence. They would like to get separate accreditation by The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The autonomy issue is going to factor into the accreditation issue. Dr. Heller is not now and never has been supportive of a totally separate USF St. Petersburg. He believes that when a legislator brought up the issue, if it had been supported, that change may have occurred, but the people working at USF St. Petersburg are very proud to be a part of this university.

Dr. Heller draws an analogy between USF St. Pete and an adolescent. The younger school wants to make decisions on its own without having to call a parent. Sometimes it makes a bad decision, sometimes it makes a good one, but it wants to make its own choices and still have the support and protection of the entire family.

USF St. Petersburg in ten years

The goal is to get the student population up to 10,000 and Dr. Heller believes that is possible. He can see it having “programs of distinction.” Dr. Heller would like to have 3,000 to 4,000 students living on campus. This would give the campus a “strong base in terms of economic support” and they could “plan on programs” because there would be students to take them. You can’t always depend on commuters to be there for planned programs. If there were more residential students there could be more courses during the day to “maximize the use of the campus.” The full-time students expect some of the activities that people expect on a college campus.

He thinks there will be a student center there in the future and continued interaction with the St. Petersburg community. Fine arts is a great program in St. Petersburg and Dr. Heller wants to work the campus into the community’s dedication to arts and theater in the St. Petersburg area. He believes that the campus will still be USF St. Petersburg, but they will have a chancellor there instead of a vice-president, so the chancellor will have more autonomy.

Education will continue to be a strong program, arts and sciences will expand and hopefully there will be some joint doctoral programs with the Tampa campus, maybe education and business. These programs give faculty a chance to interact with graduate students, which most faculty enjoy. Dr. Heller hopes that it doesn’t get much larger than 10,000 students given the size of land that they have and the community interaction that is important to their campus. The smaller and personable atmosphere is nice for a lot of the students and faculty.

Dr. Heller is most proud of

Dr. Heller is most proud of the growth of the St. Petersburg campus. Dr. Heller feels as if he had a part in the campus doubling its size in land and enrollment. Under his watch it became a four-year campus approved for residential status. Dr. Heller believes that he played a major role in this and is grateful for the many great faculty, staff and students he has interacted with over the years.

They “have a great reputation with the community.” Dr. Heller is very proud of the partnership with St. Petersburg, the partnerships they formed inside of St. Petersburg are responsible for their growth.

Finally, the “climate on the campus is still one of ‘anyone who is there is the most important person’ in anyone’s life at that particular moment. We really care about the people that come there, we care about the students, we care about each other.” He is proud of the legacy that St. Petersburg is a good place to work and study. “All of the things have been put in place and regardless of who the leader is, it is a train that is

unstoppable right now, its got an image and its got an energy that is going to sustain it for a long time to come.” Dr. Heller feels that the ten years he worked there were the most rewarding and best years of his life. He can’t wait to look back in ten years and see how the blocks he put in place have been built upon.

Final Thoughts

Although the name “University of South Florida” is a “misnomer geographically,” communities have a heart and “the heartbeat of the Tampa Bay region is centered in the University of South Florida.” “It adds so much to the quality of life,” it is something that can’t be measured, from the work of the Moffit Center to graduates working in social work, “it touches a lot of lives in this particular area.” The economic impact of the university is large, but the social contribution is also significant. It is “almost like a human element in a region that is trying to find itself and get an identity and grow.” He feels “very good about the university” he’s “been a part of.” “For a young university, it’s a great university, not only because of its educational programs, but because it does engage itself with the region.”

End of Interview