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Yael Greenberg (YG): Today is Tuesday, March 25th, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews in our studio here in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, and alumni in order to commemorate 50 years of university history. Today, we will be interviewing Dr. Gerry Meisels, who came to USF in 1988 as the provost of the University of South Florida. Currently, he is professor of chemistry and director for the Coalition for Science Literacy. Good morning, Dr. Meisels.

Gerhard Meisels (GM): Good morning.

YG: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa, and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

GM: University was looking for a provost—advertised nationally. I was one of the candidates. I interviewed, and I was hired. I was at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. I was dean of arts and sciences there.

YG: Describe the first time you saw the USF campus. What did the campus and the surrounding areas look like in 1988?

GM: Not much like a university. Fairly barren. There were lots of buildings. Landscaping was poor or nonexistent. It didn't really feel like a university. It felt more like a public institution of some kind. There was a campus, and you could see the promise, the wide arrays of land without anything on them. The entire central area that now has a reflection pond on it was just grass. Apparently for economy reasons, they had torn out all the shrubbery that was there at one time. It looked—didn't look very good. It was not a very attractive campus. It's much different today. One of the major, major changes is that USF now looks more like a university. There was on-campus housing, but not very much, and it wasn't in terribly good shape. Students in those days didn't really want to live on campus. That's changed since then also, but there was not a high priority on that. So that describes the campus as I saw it at the time.

Buildings were a variety of some reasonably well designed, some that were architectural nightmares. And, of course, they're still here. Some of them have been fixed up a little since then, like the science building. But others still badly need to be updated. Some cannot be really brought into the 21st century, like the business building—that bunker in there. That's going to be with us for a while. But, obviously, some of the architects that had been retained didn't have very good

judgment. I would have to say that retained throughout the period that I was provost—there were still some mistakes made.

YG: What does a provost do? What is a provost responsible for doing?

GM: The provost is the chief academic officer, who is responsible for basically all relationships with the faculty, with programs. He oversees academic program development. He's also an intermediary between the core functionings of the university, which are teaching, research, and public service, and the governing bodies, including the president and the business officers of the university, whose primary responsibilities are external to the university, whereas, at least with the president and of the board, the business officers are concerned with support functions, but there is a lot of them, and they tend to have a fair amount of influence. So the provost is the person who is the counterweight to the business interests and public pressure on the university.

YG: What were some of the major initiatives that, when you came in 1988 as a provost—what were some of those major initiatives regarding teaching, research, and public service that you helped to foster?

GM: I was—when I interviewed here, it was very clear that the university wanted to become a research university. And that it was part of the job of the provost to try to foster the development of a research university while not overlooking the responsibility the university has to students and to teaching. So we certainly did try in revising tenure and promotion policies to place more emphasis on a balanced judgment, to look for actual evidence of research, to apply national standards to the process rather than the local ones. At the same time, we developed a—I don't know what it's called right now, but at the time it was called the Teaching and Learning Center, and that, I think, was the counterweight to try to maintain emphasis on teaching quality and interaction with students. Lots of battles in those days about the issues of student affairs and balancing between research and teaching.

YG: These issues with student affairs between teaching and research—was that something that was brought up by the students, or was that something that was brought up internally, through faculty?

GM: It was not brought up by the students, no. It was internal—it was the Faculty Senate, the department chairs, the deans. Everybody has a somewhat different point of view. I think the good part of that was the first couple of years, we did develop a long-range plan that persisted for about 10 years. In fact, David Stamps, the current provost, was one of the committee chairs in the strategic planning process. I was working on the academic priorities, which I think is sort of a training ground for future administrators, among other things. In the implementation, we always had some problems, because after we had started this planning process and got close to conclusion, Florida went through one of its budgetary problems, and we lost almost one-fourth of our budget on a per-student basis for about two or three years. And that of course hindered any further development at that time. So that was to be expected.

YG: Do you think that we've come—that we are becoming—I know we are a Research I institution, but do you think that we're really progressing towards really stabilizing as a Research I institution?

GM: Yes, although I must say even though we are numerically a Research I institution, in institutional character, we are not that yet. We have a ways to go. I think we are a Research I institution primarily because we have a medical school here, and medical schools attract a lot of money, and that bumps up the number figures on the basis of which one determines whether it's a Research I or not. But if you look throughout the departments of the university, although there has been a great deal strengthening of research in the last 10 years or so, 10–15 years, we're still not

there. I think there are some insulated spots that are very good, very strong. But the broad basis that is required, really, to be a true Research I university, really is not there yet.

I watched, obviously, chemistry with more attention than most anything else. You cannot have a Research I university without strong sciences. That's not possible. Chemistry was reasonably strong back about 20 years ago, and then it faded and faded and faded, and it wasn't until about five years ago that the university made a real decision to do something about that. Went out and got a really good chair, first-class chair, Mike Zaworotko—first class. A lot of things are happening, and he's taking it in the right direction. There's some vision there, and without vision, the people will perish.

YG: Who was the president of the university, when you first came here in 1988?

GM: Frank [Francis] Borkowski.

YG: Did you have a lot of interaction with—

GM: Yes.

YG: What kind of a person was Mr. Borkowski?

GM: Very strongly externally oriented. Very strongly motivated to build relationships with the community. Very committed to the arts. He was a musician himself, as was his wife. He was a conductor, and I think he played the clarinet. I'm not sure. His wife was quite an accomplished flutist. He is still alive, both of them, and they're up in North Carolina. Yes. He was very much business and externally oriented.

YG: Does the provost work a lot with the president of the university to make sure that the goals of the university are met?

GM: Well, it depends on what you mean by "work a lot with." There certainly is a close relationship, and the provost is a member of the central team, the President's Council. The president's staff and such meet at least weekly, sometimes more often. I don't—sure, I mean, you work closely. But I think Borkowski more or less left the academic side to the provost. I was the one primarily working with the faculty, the Faculty Senate, academic programs, internal things such as the planning process.

I was—at his request, I looked at what is now the Pizzo—the Pizzo school [Pizzo Elementary] down there, the one on the corner down there, about the siting of that. There was a large debate in those days as to whether it should be on campus, or it should be across the street on MOSI [Museum of Science and Industry] land, or somewhere else. I led a small group, and we looked into it and recommended it be placed on the site here. I'm not sure whether the president really wanted that or not. I think he was a little surprised by the recommendation, but I think it was a good step to take.

YG: You mentioned public service as one of the duties that you helped initiate and/or were responsible [for]. What kinds of public service measures did you, as provost, help to facilitate?

GM: Well, what drives universities and all organizations, really, is a reward structure. Anything that you do, no matter where you do it, has to be recognized internally in some form. But you have a problem there, because if you're also—you can pursue all goals at the same time, and it is not the same goal for all units of the university. It's very difficult for a department of English to provide an awful lot of public service that has major impact. It's relatively easy for a college of engineering, a

college of business, or a college of education to do that—especially education, because it can interact with the community and with the school districts in the surrounding area. USF is responsible—is a lead institution for the surrounding counties, to help lead their education reform.

So, what you try to do is to help those colleges build reward structures that recognize external service like—not something you do in a very dramatic way, it's something that has to evolve. The way institutions operate is because there's such a diversity among the colleges. Just think of the difference between the College of Arts and Sciences—monumental, huge, theoretical, really not closely connected to the outside world—and then you have something like business or engineering that is very much connected to the outside world, where you have education that's connected to the public and the school system, while public health is all these things that are related to the public. So you have—each of them has to define their own mission and their own priorities. It's not one single priority for the whole institution.

What would make sense for us in sciences would not make sense for some of the other ones, and vice versa. And that's always a problem, because the public perception is that university management is monolithic, with a single set of standards and a single approach to everything. It's not true. It's not even true within a college—I think if you're looking at a college of arts and sciences, there is an enormous difference between the priorities system, the value system, and the reward structure—or should be a big difference. For, say, the sciences and philosophy, on the other hand, this is a real opposite end of the spectrum. It has nothing to do with valuing the disciplines; it only has to do with each discipline having to pursue its own process and its own peers.

One of the characteristics of a university is that its comparable programs are not at the same institution. If you want to evaluate how good a philosophy department is, you don't compare it to the chemistry department. You compare it to all the other philosophy departments that have some kind of rating or ranking system. And you do the same thing with the chemistry departments, and you see how they rank within their own peer groups. Then, you can make a comparison, sort of a dual calibration standard.

YG: You mentioned that you had come to USF from the University of Nebraska. How did USF differ in terms—how did USF differ as an institution from other institutions that you had previously worked at, or been at?

GM: My professional career has been spent in four kinds of places. My first 10 years, I worked in industry. Then I went to the University of Houston, in Houston. A public university, a young university. Much like USF, but a little bit older. It was founded earlier. A little bit, about 20 years older. Then I went to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Totally different environment. University that's been around for over a century—much more than a century, 130 years. A land-grant institution, like [the University of] Florida. The premier university in the state. Very strong football team. A real point of cohesion for the whole state. Longstanding, strong tradition, maturity, an understanding of the relationships between teaching, research, and public service. They had something like IFAS [Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences] there, the Institute of Agricultural and Natural Resources. Structured very similarly to Florida, but about half the size of Florida. But longstanding, very mature, and with all the traditions that you have in a university like that.

The University of South Florida, particularly when I came here, was young. A lot of the things that have been worked out elsewhere have not been worked out here. So you have to re-cover a lot of the things that more mature universities have already addressed, such as the balance between research and teaching, which is always an issue in a university. It's a balance between your responsibility to the students, your responsibility to the public, and your responsibility at a national

level to contribute to new knowledge and forms of artistic expression and so forth. Most of the older universities have that worked out, and the younger universities—and in that sense, USF is somewhat similar to what Houston was like when I was there. Had a lot of trouble finding the balance between students and research and funding, and all those kinds of things. And we still have a lot of trouble with that.

YG: We are a Research I institution. With that being said, are we still struggling to find that balance between research and teaching? Do we have a long way to go?

GM: Yes. We're still struggling. We still have a long way to go. I think what happens—in any institution, there's sort of a pendulum. It swings between the three focal points—mostly, though, between teaching and research. We are on the research side very much, you know, because that's where the hair is short, so that's where you put your effort, to try to move it up. I think it'll be decades before we have that balance.

YG: Do you think that faculty, because we have moved towards that Research I institution, and there are certain criteria that the university has to fulfill, do you think that the faculty is—feels a sense of—or the institution feels a sense of pressure, to make sure that they're publishing, to make sure that they're doing things?

GM: Very much so. Very much so. There's a lot of pressure out to publish, to get research grants, to bring in the dollars, to justify the research status. It's not all bad, but it's a little bit too far on the side of no recognition for any other activity. I have several friends on both sides of the fence, the people who do a lot of research, and those that don't. And in a mature university, there's room for both. There's room for people who have a very strong research focus. In most people's careers, in the younger years, you are very research focused. And then as you get a little bit older, you recognize that there's a lot more to life and to education—an education institution—than research. You begin to see there are some obligations on other sides.

There has to be some continuation, some opportunity for people like that, to be recognized and respected and rewarded. It's very important to people. It's what motivates them, makes them—keeps them happy. And so I think the people who are more on the education side in this university now are—would be too strong to say “demoralized,” but they have to understand—they have to cope with the problems, that reward structure is all geared to research. I recall a conversation with one of my colleagues not so long ago, when the president's distinguished awards were announced, whatever the number was. They almost all went to people with high researcher's ability, not to people with limited outside funding, not so much to people who had a commitment to teaching and did a good job, innovated in the area. So, you know, that's very difficult. And then you have some young people, including in chemistry, which I think is a very good move, who have a primary commitment to education. But even they will have to prove their mettle by getting funding for their research on education. It's a lot of pressure.

YG: Do you think that teaching is suffering in the university today because of this focus—primary focus on research?

GM: Well, teaching—good teaching—is a really difficult issue. Most of us grew up and learned in an environment in which there was a professor up there lecturing at the students. That was in the days when the student body was selected. There were mostly the top 10 percent of high school graduates that went to college. Only about 10,15 percent of all high school graduates went on to college and graduated from college. Environment has changed, and today that's no longer true. We have a lot of students in college who are, at best, in the top third. And if you look at higher education altogether, we know that two-thirds of all high school graduates attend postsecondary

education in some form, about half of them in community colleges. You know, our graduation rate now is something on the order of 27 to 30 percent of student—of high school graduates go on to get college degrees.

Well, the 10 percent, top 10 percent, are still motivated, they still to want to do things. They come to the university to learn and know what that's all about. But the majority, the other 20 percent, do not. They come here because it's a ticket to a better job. They want to get that degree as—really, as a means to have lifelong employment and lower unemployment probabilities and so forth. Very utilitarian. So, okay, but you deal with it, and if you deal with people like that, then you have to approach them differently. You can't just be a talking head, because you can't assume that they want to learn. So it becomes a very different approach. The issue is more severe at USF than it would be at Harvard or MIT, because they still only get the top few percent. They still only get the bright students with a lot of parental or guardian support for education, and they know what it's all about.

That's not so much true in a public university that primarily caters to a local region. So, what does that mean? That means that if you want to teach well, if you want the students to learn, you want to do your job, you have to change the way you teach, especially in the introductory courses. And in the main, that is not taking place in the university. But that's a hard sell, because it takes time, it takes commitment, it takes some insight. It takes some learning things other than those that lead to research publications. It's hard to do.

There's a faculty member in chemistry who teaches a course called "Science That Matters," which was developed—began to be developed almost 10 years ago, nine years ago, as a group effort of the community colleges, the universities science departments, public school district. The initial intent was to teach it mostly as—for future teachers, especially elementary school teachers. I can tell you from personal experience that I've talked to faculty who teach courses primarily for non-majors, including elementary school teachers. When you ask them, well, "Are you teaching what these people will need when they go out and teach in public schools?" [they] look you in the eye and say, "Gerry, I don't have the foggiest notion of what these people do in the public school." That's basically irresponsible. It is not going to change until we get past this pure research hurdle. So in the long term, we have to change, or we'll become irrelevant.

YG: As provost, did you have a lot of interaction with other departments on campus?

GM: Other departments?

YG: Other—College of Arts and Sciences, College of Architecture?

GM: Oh yeah. Sure. We had a regular meeting of the deans. They were parts of the Provost's Council. We also, at that time, included the directors of institutes like Institute on Aging and all these kinds of things. I saw them—I've forgotten what the frequency was, but it was probably monthly or maybe even weekly, I don't remember. It was often, anyway. And, of course, in all the decision-making process, particularly in budget allocation, promotion, tenure, appointment of chairs, that kind of thing, the provost's office was always involved. We were always involved in all hiring of all positions in all colleges—not the College of Medicine, because that review was outside. There was another vice president for health sciences. Still is.

YG: Before we move to being—talking about chemistry and being the director for the Coalition for Science Literacy, were there things about being a provost that really stand out in your mind, working here at the University of South Florida? Things that you fondly remember, or things that you would care not to remember?

GM: I think what I remember was probably—my most positive memories were my interactions with faculty, the Faculty Senate—the general commitment that I found in so many people, even those that don't have a great research presence, to the university and to its future. It was an unusually good group of people, and I really enjoyed interacting with them. On the negative side, well, we went through some really rough times the last couple of years while I was in the office. The president was under attack. A lot of the staff meetings were taken up with dealing with those issues that came from that. And then we had an interim president. It was a very difficult time. I do not remember very fondly all the battles with the non-academic side of the house that has very different perspectives.

YG: How long were you provost?

GM: Six years.

YG: Did you leave—did you decide that you wanted to take a break from being the provost, or was it time that the university said, “We want some new leadership,” or—

GM: Frank Borkowski left the university—he was the guy who hired me—left the university in 1993. We were getting a new president in. When she was appointed, it became pretty obvious to me that she would have preferred to appoint her own people, so I did the grateful thing and I just resigned. I think it was much better than getting fired, I guess.

YG: We're talking about Betty Castor?

GM: Yes.

YG: Where did you go from being a provost? Where did you go to next?

GM: I became director of the Coalition for Science Literacy when I left the—when I met with Betty—actually, what was his name—Bob [Bryan], the interim president. Sorry, I can't think of his last name right now. I was told—he was still on campus when I tendered my resignation, and he worked out some of the terms under which I resigned, and I asked the incoming president, Betty Castor—in fact, it was other way around—she asked me, “Well, if you resign, what do you want to do?” And I gave her a couple options, of which—I was a tenured professor of chemistry, so that was—already I came here as a tenured professor of chemistry. I do have about 100 research publications. I've been here. We just worked it out. We worked out some basic elements of what that coalition would look like, what its charter would be, what it was supposed to do. And then when I resigned formally, officially, then at the same time, I took on the directorship of the coalition.

YG: What is the Coalition of Science Literacy?

GM: Well, it's a group of institutions that work together to try to improve teaching in mathematics and science—or more accurately, learning in mathematics and science—in public schools and universities in the Tampa Bay region, greater Tampa Bay region. We have at times led statewide initiatives. I also serve as the chair of the Statewide Coalition for Improving Mathematics and Science Education for Florida. A long handle, but that has been responsible for changing some legislation, providing funds for better training for elementary school teachers, including science and the public school comprehensive assessment test, the FCAT. So we've had some influence there. I still serve as chair of that, but it's been kind of inactive for the last year or so. Basically, it's an organization that tries to exercise leadership to improve things in math and science education.

YG: You mentioned the idea of better training for math and science teachers in the state of Florida. Is there a lack of training among math and science teachers in the state of Florida?

GM: Well, let me give you a couple numbers, just to give you some idea. I wish I brought that with me. Last year, the school district of Hillsborough County hired 50 people to teach middle school mathematics. Of those 50, there were only three that were certified to teach in that area. The others basically came off the street—that's a somewhat strong statement. They might have had some background in mathematics, but they were not trained to teach. Their mathematics might have been specialized in some form. It might've been people out of business. Of those—statistically speaking, of those 50 people they hired, and these are round numbers, I don't have the exact numbers in my head—by the end of four years, probably half of them won't be there anymore. Some of them drop out within the first few months.

It's not much different in science. It's better, but not much different. If we're looking at Florida statewide, only 15 percent of our need for science and math—15 percent in mathematics, 17 percent in science, are met by college graduates from the universities in the state. So we have to either import them from somewhere else, or we have to take them from business and industry, called “alternative career” people. People who might have been working for an accounting firm, or might have been working for one of the science-related companies in the area that the state—they either got fired or whatever. Something happened, they wanted to do another career, so they're career-change people.

We have actually a grant right now, from the Department of Education in Washington, to try to prepare these people better, to attract more of them, and to prepare them better and support them in the first year of teaching, to try to reduce their turnover and improve what's happening in the classroom. A very large part of the problem has to do with—excuse me. You were talking about the problems of public education. Well, you talk about the change in the culture, and the kind of students that come to the university—really begins in our public schools. The people who come through public schools live in a different environment and live in a different culture than the people who teach students, and they need to be handled in a different way.

So there's a big adjusting to that cultural change—to a large extent, the lack of parental support. Great problems of diversity—public schools are a very different kind of a balance than you have in people in general, certainly at the university. All that has to be addressed in some form. One of the greatest issues that new teachers deal with that haven't gone through the normal teaching experience is dealing with classroom discipline, classroom management. Major issues, and so a lot of the work we do with teachers teaching science in the middle and high schools is to help them learn more about how to manage a classroom, 30 kids that are not necessarily accustomed to discipline.

YG: Why is the University of South Florida interested in public school science and math education?

GM: Enlightened self-interest. Most of our students come from this area, that would be answer number one. Answer number two, that it is a standard obligation of any institution, of any university, to support the rest of the educational establishment that surrounds it. Where is the leadership going to come from for changing things in the public schools, if it doesn't come from the universities? In fact, one of our problems is that here at USF, as with most institutions, colleges of education are not very high on the priority list.

As a consequence, there are staffing problems. Education careers are not all that attractive to start with. How do you handle that, or what do you do with it? Who's going to do that? If you are in a public school and you're teaching six periods a day, you really don't have the time or the energy to develop innovative approaches. You've got to have some release for that, or you have to work with

other people, but you're also not trained to go through change processes. But university faculty are in a much better position. Even in a college of education, they teach three courses a semester, which is not being in a classroom for six hours a day. And if you go into the science department, there's less than that.

So there's a lot more time to think, a lot more time to work on things, and a lot more time to stay current with what is going on in the field. I think one of the problems you have in public education is that they are so busy doing what they're doing, they don't really have the time or inclination to find out what needs to be changed. And, of course, change is always difficult. It always takes more effort and time. So most people out in the workforce resist change, not only in the public schools, but also in the university, and in the business world as well.

In the business world, you have one advantage, because if you don't change, you die—that is, the company either changes or dies. So you have very much a survival kind of a strategy or a philosophy. If you can't change, you do go downwards. Look at companies like Xerox that just gradually—Polaroid, you know, you've got to get out of this stuff. They're working very hard to get out of it, but it's not easy, because once you're accustomed to doing things in one way, to change it is stressful.

YG: The coalition is something that's funded by the University of South Florida?

GM: The University of South Florida funds my position and that of an administrative assistant, and I have a very small operating budget.

YG: Where is it physically located on campus?

GM: HMS 456. Fourth floor of the HMS building.

YG: In addition to helping the community and public schools do—does—is one of the missions of the coalition to help the science and mathematics department on the university campus?

GM: Absolutely. I talked to you about Dr. Potter's course on science that matters. There's actually a book that's going to be published. The whole thing began with a conference put together by the Coalition for Science Literacy in 1995 or '96, somewhere thereabouts, in which we got all these people together to think through what we should be doing, you know, introductory science courses, math courses. Science and math are two different avenues. Science got to this book—much of this approach. And it's a different way of teaching. It's not the normal textbook kind of way of teaching. It's demanding of the faculty member. So gradually we taught more and more of it. It takes a long time, and to get the material together to make the supporting material—the text material that the students need to feel they can do some homework with it—it takes time. And you have to train the faculty to teach in that mode, which is not something that comes naturally, where there's not just a talking head in front of a class.

YG: These new methodologies—teaching strategies—are these something that you employ, as—in addition to being the director of the coalition, you are a professor of chemistry. Are these some—these methodologies, these strategies—are these something that you utilize in the classroom?

GM: I don't teach in the classroom. I teach faculty, and I teach the community, people in the community. Not the teachers so much, but the supervisors, the math and science supervisors. I try to get them to change what they're doing.

YG: What are some of the—not necessarily complaints, but feelings of these faculty here on

campus about the science and the mathematics, and the students who are coming in and taking these classes? Are they frustrated?

GM: Well, I think the general reaction is that obviously students are not prepared. They haven't had a normal expectation of what a high school graduate should have in science or mathematics. If they've had it, if they had even taken such courses, then they haven't been very well structured. That these students are not really motivated to work or to think, they want the easy answers. But that's been a problem for a long time, and in many—most institutions. And I remember some exchanges—when you try to lead a student through thinking through a problem, so they develop a method of analyzing things, they get very impatient.

If they get too impatient, they'll tell you, Don't do all that stuff, just give me the answer so I can put it in the test the next time, memorize it and put it in the test. I think they're drilled to do that in the high schools. I think most of our assessment systems are drilled to get students to remember things, rather than to think things through, and that is a major shift that must take place. There's a lot of talk about it, but everybody knows it has to be done. Not everybody—those who are in the know of what's going on, know that it has to be done. But it's not happening a lot. But they're working on it.

YG: Are there some unique problems, or situations, specifically to the University of South Florida, in relation to their science and mathematics departments?

GM: Well, probably the science department is much more than any other—are very focused on research. It's in that culture. It's also in those areas where the outside money is available more so than it would be in philosophy or English. So there's a lot of pressure on the science departments, on the fundable departments, to produce funding. That also means that the reward structure is geared towards rewarding outside money, research, publications, that sort of thing. And that isn't exactly very helpful in trying to improve what's happening in the classroom. Everybody is similar in asking, What's in it for me? What's my reward for wasting all this time? There are some processes in place to do that, but nonetheless, that's a problem.

I think if you're looking—some departments use temporary help, or adjuncts, or people just to deal with the larger number of undergraduates. Physics does that, biology does that. That really—I'm going to be very candid with you, but it's basically an abnegation of responsibilities. We don't want to deal with all these unwashed masses, so we're going to go hire somebody to take care of that so we don't have to think about it anymore. To chemistry's credit, despite being a good department, the leadership understands that it has to do more than that. It's one reason I have a lot of respect for Mike Zaworotko. He has a much better insight into what the university needs to do than the other departments do. Geology's pretty good, too, as a matter of fact.

YG: When you came here in 1988, did you think you'd be here 15 years?

GM: Well, I never looked that far ahead. It was at the time—when I left the provost position, I had two choices. I could try to look for a job somewhere else, or I could do what I wound up doing. I like the idea of doing what I'm doing. I like Tampa. I like the university. There really was no strong motivation for me to go somewhere else. I did look at a couple other jobs, but it just wasn't of enough interest to me. You can't make those decisions ahead of time. But to be honest with you, no, I did not think that I would be here for 15 years.

YG: This coalition—was this something that you decided—that you created, that you said to Castor, you know what, I have this idea? Or was this something that you had been planning, or thinking about, while you were being a provost?

GM: Well, it's closer to the former than the latter, although obviously as a chemist, as a scientist, you run into the issues, and you know what the problems are, and you know what needs to be done. I was—I was chairman of the Council of Scientific Society Presidents while I was provost. I had been president of the American Society for Mass Spectrometry. And we had several meetings that dealt with the issues of science education. This was just in the time before the National Science Education Standards appeared, and the mathematics folks were issuing their NCTM [National Council of Teachers of Mathematics] standards. It was a very formative period for that. So I was quite aware of what was happening.

I was also aware of the fact that USF wasn't doing a damn thing about it. So I did go to the president and said, "This is what I would like to do." Now, had I planned to establish it ahead of time? Yes and no. In about 19—I would say it would've been about 1992, somewhere about 1993, I commissioned the College of Education to do a planning process. I paid for a faculty member's partial salary out of the provost's office to plan an initiative in mathematics and science education. That didn't work. I didn't get a plan. The communication between the dean and the faculty member was not very good. So I didn't get what I asked for. Well, so, you know, it had been several years of thinking and planning ahead of time before this thing was established, but in the end, I did go to the president and said this is one of the two things I'm interested in doing, and here are my ideas what to do, and that's the one she thought would be a better choice.

YG: I want to ask two more questions. You mentioned that before you left as provost, Borkowski was going through some turmoil, if you will. Would you care to elaborate a little bit on this, and how this affected you as provost?

GM: Gee, you saved the best question for last—I guess the touchiest question.

YG: You don't have to answer this question. You don't have to answer it if you don't want to.

GM: Well, I'll answer it. At least part of it—partly. I can't remember the exact time, it must have been about '92, '91. There was a problem with a football player—a basketball player, sorry, a basketball player—who had been accused of raping a girl. He was, however, a star basketball player, and the president was very ambitious to have a successful sports team. The sports endeavor was supervised by—reported to the vice president for student affairs, who was also very committed to basketball and really wanted a winning team.

The president was misled, badly, by his vice president. He was—not being a terribly analytical person, he didn't check him out. Committed himself to a course of action in defense of that player that was indefensible. This lasted about two years. Things were just really bad. Bad stories in the press. There was stuff going on at the regents level. The chancellor of the university was on the president, and a substantial amount of time at the president's staff meeting was devoted to his getting advice on how to proceed on those issues.

It also kind of paralyzed any initiatives, because when the president is that occupied with his own survival, you can't really do anything, because almost everything, even though the president doesn't have to do it, he's got to approve of it. If you want to do anything major, he has to get involved, at least to some extent. The last two years were pretty tough, I think. It became obvious that he'd better go find himself another job, which he managed to do, in '93. But for about two years, it was very rough.

YG: In terms of where you see the university moving in the next 15 years—being a provost, being the director of the Coalition, you've done a lot of things, you've had a lot of interaction. Where do you see the university in 15 years?

GM: Well, I'll have to go and get my crystal ball out. Any prediction or projection you could make at this point is highly uncertain. It depends on a number of things. For example, you know that the university budgets are going to get a real substantial cut this year. Well, you know, what's going to happen two, three, four, five years from now is going to have a very large influence on the way this institution develops. Making it a better university costs money—doesn't come for free.

So, what do I see as happening? Well, basing it on what I've seen over the last, say, 10 years or so, not even 15, just the last 10 years, I think it will become a better university. I think the quality of its offerings will increase. It'll be a more focused university. It'll put more of its resources into selected areas, rather than across the board. I think it will continue to be a strong—and even a strong research—university. I think the building programs that are now on the way—or will soon be on the way—will help enable that. You know, the new science facilities, things like that, the engineering building—all will help put a greater focus on the research dimension in the physical—in physical areas, which means the natural sciences and engineering, which are, to a large extent, the areas on which the university's reputation rests.

If you don't have a strong science area, you don't have a strong university. It's that simple. You can—I don't want to name the departments that don't have to be good, but the other ones, you can select. You can pick from them, choose from the other ones, but you can't do it without strong sciences. So I think that that drive will continue, and there will be a strong science department, ever stronger as time goes along. At the same time, I think as the university matures and goes through its difficult and painful growing process, I think the attention paid to quality of teaching will gradually increase, over the next 10 or 15 years.

And what we really want to strive for, as a university, is what you call a “balanced university.” There's a good sense of the balance between the research, teaching, and public service. We don't have that now. You want to see models of that—it's most prevalent in the private universities. A private university knows that it cannot do without good teaching. You must have good teaching, while also doing research as much as you can. That's not yet the case here, and part of that has to do with the different way we compete for students. This university can always keep its enrollment up. It's not that difficult. Private is not that—it's not true. We deal, really, primarily with place-bound students who come from this region, and they are always going to be a reservoir. And as Tampa grows, the student enrollment at USF will grow.

We are very unique in many respects here. I came—I spent years in Houston, as you know. Well, Houston had Rice University also, right there, and a totally separate medical institution, the University of Texas Medical Center. Very fine center. But if you wanted to talk in Houston about education, you talked to Rice, you didn't talk to University of Houston, because it was the prestige institution. We don't have that competition here. There are other postsecondaries, the University of Tampa, but they are minimal players. You don't ask—when you speak of education in Tampa, you don't go to the University of Tampa, you come to the University of South Florida. So you basically have a large, closed market.

What I don't know what is going to happen over the next few years is the degree to which USF St. Petersburg will become autonomous and will become competition, the degree to which St. Petersburg College, now four years, will expand its offerings and become competition for USF. However, because of the age difference and the perspective difference, it is always going to be the Tampa campus that is going to be the lead institution and the senior institution in the area. I don't think this can change. And that's a real asset for the university. You can go around—go to New Orleans. I mean, that's a comparable size city. You've got a good private university there, and you've got a public university that's not quite so good. Not really the major prestige player in the

New Orleans area. You can go to Dallas and you get the same—you could just, all over the place you go, you find most cities have that. If you go to New York City, it's Columbia that's the big thing, it's not the public institution there.

YG: Dr. Meisels, thank you very much.

GM: You're very welcome. Almost an hour.

End of interview.