

Oral History Transcript

John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection

Interviewee Robert H. Suzuki = RS

Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB

Interview conducted on March 29, 1990 at an unspecified location

Transcribed by: Katherine Sirca

Edited by: Philip Walsh

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Biographical Note:

Robert Suzuki, born in Oregon in 1936, was confined in a camp for Japanese Americans with his family during World War II. He earned a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering from UC Berkeley in 1960, and a PhD in Aeronautics from the California Institute of Technology in 1967. He served as Dean of Graduate Studies and Research at California State University, Los Angeles from 1981 to 1985, and as Vice President for Academic Affairs at CSUN from 1985 to 1991. He then served as President of California State Poly Pomona from 1991 until he retired in 2003. During his tenure at CSUN, he worked diligently to increase funding for instruction and research through grants and through reallocation of funds from other campus programs. He also worked to increase diversity among the faculty, and to raise graduation rates of minorities at CSUN.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, Side A

JB: You arrived in 1985.

RS: That's correct.

JB: What were your major goals, when you came here?

RS: Well, I had some general notions, John, but I really wanted to get familiar with the campus and what the faculty and the administration saw as some of its priorities. Certainty, even before I arrived, one of my major agendas was to promote educational equity and affirmative action. I also, because of my experience as Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, was interested in promoting more activity in research and creative activities. But beyond that, I had fairly general ideas about what my personal agenda might be. I was more interested, I think, in what the agenda was as viewed by the faculty and by the administration here. And I was quite pleased to find that there had been considerable thought given to the various priorities of the university. There had been some planning that had gone on before, and so, as I became familiar with those plans, and as I talked with faculty, slowly we began to develop an agenda for the campus.

JB: I want to get into a couple of those priorities, research and ed equity in particular. And so, maybe we can go directly into those and look back on that agenda from the perspective of five years later, toward the end of our talk today. Our campus has had an affirmative

action educational equity program for many years. It's— particularly pertaining to faculty hiring, how successful has it been thus far?

RS: The Faculty Diversity Program itself, I think, has been quite successful, John, in comparison to the standard affirmative action program that this campus, as well as many other campuses in the system, had been following previous to that time. On the average, in the previous ten years, we were hiring about one Black faculty member and one Latino faculty member per year, over a period of about ten years. We were barely holding our own. In fact, with Black faculty, we were actually losing ground. That's when I asked Jeanette Mann and Don Cameron to explore alternatives. And I had this big notion in my mind of setting aside some positions centrally and using those positions as an incentive for greater efforts for affirmative action. As Jeanette and Don begin to look into the matter, we came upon the Targets of Opportunity program that UC system had implemented a couple years before. And we got information on that program, looked at it, and began to conceptualize the Faculty Diversity Program. And so, we finally implemented that program and in the first year, we hired, I think, something like three Black faculty members and four Latino faculty members. In the second year, the total Black and Latino faculty members hired to the program went up to, I think, nine. And this year, we expect to hire more than that. If we had the positions this year, we could probably hire as many as twenty through the Faculty Diversity Program, and I'm talking about Black, Latino, and Indian faculty, which this program really focuses on. So, I think if you look at it in those terms, the absolute numbers may not seem to be large, but when you compare it to the one Black and one Latino faculty member being hired per year in the previous ten years, it's a substantial improvement over those earlier efforts.

JB: I went into effect in '87, '88, did it?

[00:05:00]

RS: Um, yeah, I believe it was around '87, '88.

JB: What are our educational equity goals today? To see those numbers rise?

RS: Well, educational equity as we define it on this campus, John, is, it really pertains to students more than faculty. When I use the term "affirmative action," I'm referring primarily to the hiring of faculty and staff. So, are you talking about the student educational equity efforts?

JB: Let's look at affirmative action as if we were using the term first, and then let's look at the equity as we use the term... (both talking at once)

RS: Uh, so you want to-

JB: -the faculty goals initially?

RS: As far as faculty affirmative action goes, I think that our goal there was fairly general: to do substantially better than we had been doing in the past. I think, ultimately, the goal is to

diversify our faculty so that it comes a lot closer to looking like our student population than it does right now. Um, and we are not putting any specific numbers on that. I know that in the past, the federal affirmative action guidelines required you to try to come up with some goals based on the available pool of minority and women faculty. I haven't particularly pushed that particular agenda, because I think that a more realistic goal is to try to approach the diversity of our student population, which may be a higher goal, actually, than looking at the available pools. I believe the available pools may be appropriate for an institution located somewhere in the Midwest, the average state, but California is not the average state, as you know. We are the most diverse state in the country, and I think, therefore, we ought to have higher goals in terms of our affirmative action efforts.

JB: In terms of our educational equity efforts, what are we looking for there?

RS: There, again, we are trying to diversify our student population on campus so that it reflects the diversity of the communities that we're serving. Namely, the Greater Los Angeles Area. If you look at the diversity in our public school service area, it's much higher than the diversity on our campus right now. Probably double the diversity, if you look at percentage of ethnic minorities in the public schools currently in our service area. About sixty percent of the students are ethnic minorities in our service area. About thirty percent of our students on campus are ethnic minorities. So, we're lagging behind the public school segment. You would expect about a six year lag in any case, and I fully expect that, within the next six to eight years, fifty percent of our students on this campus will be ethnic minorities. As you may know—even right now, our first time freshman—over fifty percent are ethnic minorities. So, the change is coming rapidly. As far as our goals go, I don't think we will have difficulty reaching the goal of diversifying the students who are coming into this university. We are already approaching those goals. The real challenge is trying to meet the retention and graduation rate goals for the ed equity program, which is to try to raise those for the underrepresented groups; to equal that for the general student population. It's substantially lower, particularly for Blacks, than for the general population. It's almost one half for Blacks. I think for the—

JB: Almost one half graduate or drop out?

RS: Well, the graduation rate is one half that of white students. For white students, it's on the order, about forty percent. For Black students, it's down below twenty percent. So, it's about one half or less than the rate for white students. We want to raise that to equal that of white students, ultimately.

[00:10:00]

JB: So, the problem, really, is less in attracting minorities to the campus than keeping them through graduation?

RS: Right, absolutely.

JB: Would it be a fair summary to say, then that educational equity is intended to raise the percentage of minorities among the student body such that they mirror the percentage in the broader community in their service area. And the goal of affirmative action, is, in turn, to diversify the faculty to reflect the diversity in the student body.

RS: I think that's probably a fair assessment now.

JB: What happens if we fail at these things?

RS: I think that, uh, if we fail in reaching those goals, uh, it could have some significant ramifications in terms of how well we are responding to the changes in the state and in the country as a whole. I think that we can ill afford to fail because the future of this state and the future of this country ultimately depends, rather critically, on our succeeding at this effort. Because, as you may know, the demographics indicate that an increasing proportion of our workforce is going to be comprised of ethnic minorities, particularly underrepresented minorities. I'm talking about Latinos, Chicanos, and Blacks. Minorities, as a whole, already constitute close to one half of the working age work force in the state of California. In another fifteen to twenty years, they may comprise sixty to seventy percent of that workforce. And if we are not successful in adequately educating that large a proportion of our working age population, it is going to have some serious ramifications for our economy. And I think the private sector recognizes this very clearly, as you see various corporations making major efforts to better prepare ethnic minorities, to recruit them, to assist them in succeeding. We're seeing programs titled "Managing Diversity in the Workplace" being implemented in many, many firms. So, there's a clear recognition out there that we need to be very concerned about this problem and to solve it, because it will have serious consequences for us if we don't.

JB: I'd like you to tie the affirmative action dimension back into something that we were discussing earlier over lunch, that some of our faculty colleagues feel, or seem to feel, that affirmative action, and particularly affirmative action where you move outside the hiring pool and conventional hiring practices, is wrong on principle. They seem to say that they approve of educational opportunity, or of faculty diversity as an idea, but they don't necessarily approve of the quality of result. I'm not sure that's a fair representation of the diversity of their interpretations. But I wonder how you might respond to what you've heard in the way of opposition to affirmative action as we've experienced it here?

[00:14:00]

RS: I think if the ultimate goal is to hire a high quality faculty, then we need to question whether the standard traditional affirmative action process involving simply, a national search, has in fact, been effective in reaching that ultimate goal of hiring a quality faculty. And I think we need to look at how faculty were hired in the past before affirmative action programs were implemented, John. When we got our first jobs in academia, no such process existed. In fact, national searches were rare. I received my

first job as a result of a phone call from my mentor at Caltech [California Institute of Technology] to his former doctoral student of many years previous at USC. I didn't even go through an interview. My mentor simply told the chair of this department that he thought I should be hired by him, since he had some positions available. So, I was hired without even a search or an interview. And this was not that uncommon back in those days. There was, indeed, an old boys' network. And while we look back on that process and we say how terrible it was, and how discriminatory it was, one thing I think we need to look at is the fact that it still led to the development of some outstanding departments with very good faculty. What was wrong with it was that it did not provide equal access to all groups, and that's what led to the development of affirmative action. And affirmative action, in turn, led to national searches, but that doesn't necessarily mean it leads to better results. Better results, in the sense that, it probably provided more access to a wider spectrum of groups. But I think that the standard national search process doesn't necessarily lead to the identification and the recruitment and the hiring of the best candidates, particularly if you don't use some of the networks that still exist out there. Not only the old boys' network, but the various ethnic networks as well, and the women's networks that exist. I think you get far better candidates through the utilization of those networks working hand in hand with, perhaps, a national search, than you do simply through a national search without utilizing those networks. I don't think the networks, per se, were bad in terms of identifying outstanding candidates. That old boys' network, in some ways, worked very effectively in identifying outstanding candidates from a particular ethnic group and from a particular gender. Affirmative action was designed to open access much wider. And so, in that sense, I think that we need to look at the results because, in some sense, you can say that there's de facto evidence that the standard national search affirmative action process has not worked very effectively because it really has not changed the numbers very much in terms of increasing the representation of underrepresented minorities. I think it has worked fairly effectively for white women. Their numbers have increased substantially, but the same is not true for underrepresented minorities. I think you also have to look at the issue of, what do you mean by a quality faculty? Quality as defined by what standards, because when we begin to look at the growing diversity of our student population, we also have to look at the changing needs of that population. The fact that they need role models, they need to see the diversification of faculty. And I think, using the traditional standards by which we define quality in assessing the qualifications of faculty candidates, we need to rethink that, because quality needs to be redefined so that we can meet the needs of this much more diverse student population we are serving. And I think, if we began to look at those dimensions of quality, we may come up with some very different criteria for assessing the qualifications of faculty candidates. So, there are a lot of issues, I think, that revolve around the question that you raise. It's not a simple issue, it's not a question of the standard affirmative action process being fairer, because I think you need to look at the fact that there appears to be de facto evidence that it's not working. It is not leading to greater equity, at least for certain underrepresented groups, even though it has the appearance of being fairer and more equitable, but the results don't indicate that it is. And furthermore, I think we have to look at what we

mean when we assess the quality of candidates. So, these are all issues that need to be examined, I think, in trying to address the issue that you raise. It's not an easy issue to address, it's a very complex one. And I think people of good intentions would differ in their judgements about it.

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JB: One thing that I sense that you're placing highest on the list of priorities, as you've described those priorities, is the student population and its benefit from a diverse faculty.

RS: Right.

JB: Is that an accurate statement?

RS: I think that's very accurate, John.

JB: Do you think the faculty see things in those terms, on the whole?

RS: I think many of them do. Some of them may not. Some of them may see an academic program concept as the priority, almost divorced from the student population that they're serving. I think, John, that a lot of the faculty who came into higher education let's say, thirty years ago, have not recognized the tremendous changes that have taken place in the student population served by higher education during that period of time. If you look back thirty years ago at American higher education, there were something like three and a half million students enrolled in institutions of higher education nationally. Thirty, not even thirty years later, twenty-five years later, there are close to twelve million students enrolled in institutions of higher education; three hundred fifty percent increase in the numbers of students served. And, at the same time, the general population increased by only thirty percent, which meant that higher education was serving a far more diverse student population twenty-five years later than they were earlier. And yet, many of the faculty who came into higher education thirty years ago, I think, are still thinking in terms of that student population they served when they first entered higher education. And of course, you find a lot of faculty bemoaning the under-preparation of students today, and the fact that they simply don't make them like they used to. And I think many of them don't recognize that the student population we are serving today is a far more diverse population, a much wider range in the backgrounds of these students and their preparation for college, and haven't really come to grips with this tremendous diversity. And they are approaching the teaching process in the same way that they approached it when they first entered higher education thirty years earlier. Thinking that they ought to be able to teach this much more diverse student population in the same way that they were able to teach the much more homogenous student population they first encountered when they entered. Well, that's simply not the case anymore, and we need to come to grips with it. A number of faculty clearly recognize this change and have adapted to it, and are meeting the needs of this much more diverse student population. But I think there's a significant number of faculty who

still have not come to that realization. And so, I think historically, that's the process that we've gone through, and one that we need to have greater consciousness of.

[00:24:26]

JB: President Cleary refers to CSUN as the people's university at commencement time, for example. And I like the phrase, I think a lot of us like the phrase. But the people's universities, which I tend to think of at least as being concentrated in the CSUN, the CSU system, seem to get short shrift on prestige, at budget times, and other priorities. In fact, to carry this just a bit further, the CSU has often been portrayed, and I think perceived by many of its own faculty, as a poor relation or poor cousin of the UC system, in what is in fact a three-tiered master plan caste system? That the cards are stacked very much against anything but general, pedagogical and educational mediocrity in our system, by formulas and other constraints that are quite firm and rigid. Is that anything like an accurate perception?

RS: I would have two responses to that, John, that may seem contradictory. My first response is that there's probably a lot of truth to that point of view. That we have a stratified system of public higher education in this day, in which the UC system is the most richly funded and the community colleges are the least funded. You could make the argument that it's a form of de facto segregation. Segregation by race and by socioeconomic background, because if you look at the backgrounds of the students that go to the various segments, you find that the poorest students, both economically and in terms of academic preparation, end up in the community colleges, and the students from the wealthiest families end up in the UC system. We get the students somewhere in between. And, actually the funding, the allocation of resources to these systems may have been turned on its head in that respect, because the UC system clearly receives far more funding per student than the other two segments. The community colleges get the least amount of funding per student. Yet, in many respects, the CSU campuses and the community colleges have a far more difficult task of teaching and assisting the students that they serve, because they come far more underprepared than the students that go to the UC campuses. I think I've said this to you before, that you can take students who go to the UC system and probably throw them into a warehouse, and they'll still learn and they'll still be fairly successful after they graduate because of their socioeconomic background, because of their academic preparation. It'd be much tougher to do that with the students we serve and the students that are served by the community colleges. They need more assistance, and yet we get less resources to provide that additional assistance. So, I think there is some truth to that point of view, that we are a stratified system of higher education. Now, my other response, my other point of view on that, is somewhat turning the coin on the other side. It's interesting to talk to people from institutions in other states that are far less well funded than we are, and they find out the kind of funding that we receive in the CSU system, and their reaction is, Oh, what are you complaining about? We think you're doing so well and you're getting so well-funded! We don't know what you're complaining about! And I think there's a lot of truth to that point of view as well. That we are getting reasonably well funded in comparison

to institutions in other states. Even some of the research institutions look at us and say, wow, you're doing pretty well in comparison to us! And furthermore, I think that one of the problems that I have seen within the CSU is the low esteem in which people within the system hold of themselves. I think they're always looking toward the UC system and the research institutions, seeing the grass greener on that side of the fence. Instead of really beginning to look at the CSU as an institution that could really make the biggest difference in terms of education for the people of the state of California. I think that in many respects, our role in public higher education in California is the most important role of any of the three segments. I think the students that we serve are the students that can really be assisted by higher education. I think the students that the UC system serve can do pretty well regardless of the quality of education that is provided to them. However, the students we serve will depend critically on how well we are able to educate them. Unless we do a quality job of education for these students, they probably won't make it in our society. And, of course, we serve far larger numbers of students as well, in terms of the four year institutions of higher education in the state. I think that we keep selling ourselves short in terms of our role and our mission within the CSU. We always look toward-

[END OF TRACK 1]