

Oral History Transcript

CSUN Leaders

Interviewee Colin Donahue = CD

Interviewed by Jessica Kim = JK

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Transcribed by Albert Dubin and Steve Kutay

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JK: Okay, good morning. Today is Tuesday, April 12, 2022. This is Jessica Kim. I'm in Los Angeles, California and on a zoom call with Vice President for Administration and Finance and CFO [Chief Financial Officer] Colin Donahue, of California State University, Northridge. We're about to begin recording his oral history. This interview will become part of the campus leadership oral history project. Vice President Donahue began his career at California State University, Northridge in 1996, when he joined the University as manager of construction services in the wake of the 1994 Northridge earthquake. Since then he served as director of facilities planning, design, and construction from 2000 to 2006, associate vice president for facilities development and operations from 2006 to 2013, and then as vice president for administration and finance and chief financial officer from 2013 to the present. Prior to his role at California State University Northridge, Vice President Donahue worked in the private sector as a project engineer and project manager overseeing commercial and institutional construction projects. His educational background includes a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering technology from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and a Master of Public Administration from California State University, Northridge (CSUN). Over his career at CSUN, Vice President Donahue has overseen a wide variety of university operations including finance, budget management, capital development, risk management, human resource management, police services, and intercollegiate athletics. Accomplishments, to name just some, include design and construction of the Valley Performing Arts Center, now called The Soraya; establishing CSUN as a leader in campus sustainability initiatives; the development of a campus hotel, conference [center], and restaurant; a number of staff diversity and retention efforts; development of the campus master plan called Envision 2035; managing all aspects of the \$407 million Northridge Earthquake Recovery Program; and expansion of student housing and parking facilities. So it's an honor to be with you today, Vice President Donahue, to have you tell your story and share your insights.

CD:

Great to be here with you.

JK: We'll begin at the very beginning of when and where were you born? And can you tell us a bit about your parents and family background?

CD: Sure. I was born in Los Angeles in 1964. In West Los Angeles, and I lived there for the first part of my life, probably the first four years or so, four or five years. But I grew up primarily in San Bernardino, East San Bernardino area in a place called Highland, California until I went to college. My parents are both Los Angeles natives. So something really interesting about me, that I tell people sometimes is, I'm a fifth-generation Californian, which is pretty rare actually. From, from my interactions with people, I don't hear a lot of people [are] that way. So, a long history here in California and the LA [Los Angeles] area. Both my parents are from LA. My dad is a graduate of UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. So he was, I think, probably the first in the family to have a college degree. He served a little bit of time in the military. And then my mother also grew up in LA. She didn't finish college. She actually spent a little bit of time at Seattle University. And she, you know, spent a lot of time working and raising four kids in my family. So I'm number two in four kids.

JK: And what were your early experiences with education?

CD: Well I went to a mixture of public and private schools. I spent some time in Catholic school, mostly grade school. And then went to public high school in San Bernardino, which was a pretty interesting time. Back then that would have been in--I was in high school from 1979 until I graduated in '82. And so back at that time, in California, we had mandatory busing. A lot of people don't remember that. So that was one of my first early experiences with just diversity. And the school that I went to, one that was on the east side of San Bernardino, and was probably primarily White and Hispanic. And we had busing from the west side of San Bernardino which was primarily Black. So there's a lot of integration. It was a really interesting and kind of a really cool time, to be honest with you. I learned a lot there. So I left high school, as you said, went to Cal Poly Pomona [California Polytechnic Institute, Pomona]. Kind of always wanted to be in the design and engineering/construction field, and how to get experience there. And probably didn't ever think I would go on to get a master's degree. When I started out, I was a project engineer and a project manager for a large contractor. And so that probably wasn't an aspiration, because it wasn't necessary for that profession. But when I came to CSUN, I probably never recognized that I'd be here 25 years later, and you rattled off the reason I have been, is I've had several really great opportunities. So it's always been fresh and new for me. But around, let's see, around 2007, I think, I decided, Well, if I'm going to be here my [whole] career, it's probably time to go back and get a master's degree. And so I was in the Public Administration master's degree here at CSUN, which was fantastic to go to the Tseng College. And it's really, really valuable. Especially for someone like me,

that went back to school later in life in my--what would that have been, my 40s? Early to mid-40s. And really got a lot of benefit out of it that time, probably more than I did the first go around, because I cherished it a little bit more and was really more integrated into higher ed.

JK: At this point, I'd ask you to back up a little bit. But did you grow up expecting to go to college? And what were your professional goals as a child and a young person?

CD: Yeah, so that was one thing with my parents and my family. And I used to tell my kids this when they were younger, there was never any question that we were going to go to college and all there was four of us. I have an older brother and two younger sisters. We all graduated. [We] all had at least bachelor's degrees. And it was just an expectation in my family. So it never was a question. It was just a question of what you would go into, and what field you would follow. Interestingly enough for me, I was always interested in the field I ended up studying from a really early age. I was always really interested in [a field that was] kind of creative, and somewhat artistic. And so I probably knew that I would either go into architecture or construction. And I ended up falling into construction management, construction engineering at Cal Poly Pomona, which really seemed like a great fit for me. I started out in civil engineering and I did a lot of work. I worked my way through college, I was a draftsman. That was a great thing to do back then. And you had to actually be able to draw, there wasn't computers then. It was right before the advent of computer design. And I got pretty good at it. And so I was always employable. I always had a job drafting. And through that, I learned that I really didn't want to be a design engineer and really wanted to be out in the field. And that's why I was exposed to a friend that was, Hey, I'm in this major, you should check this out, and I ended up switching to construction engineering.

JK: So you touched on this a bit, but you are a graduate two times over in the California State University system. Can you talk about your experiences as an undergraduate? And then, this is something you did touch on, what led you to pursue a graduate degree? I'm really interested in hearing, sort of, what impact that Cal State [California State University system] had on your career and sort of creating and shaping your career opportunities.

CD: Yeah, I was one of those students that had a lot going on. Like I said, I worked a lot through my undergrad career, which is hard when you're an engineering major. So it took me around, I think, five years, maybe an extra quarter to graduate. I lived in the dorms and had the college experience the first year, year and a half, but after that wasn't as really immersed in things because I was just so busy in my life. But I think my experience really was, in undergrad, we actually had a lot of the professors that were

professionals. Practicing engineering professionals. Which, there's always tenured faculty versus lecturers. But I think in Engineering, I had some fantastic role models that were out there doing the work as well as a number of the tenured professors that were there all the time. So, that was a real advantage, I think. It was a pretty hands-on program. So, I liked that aspect of it. You know, in that at major you get to mix concrete and break bolts and test things and survey. Surveying was always a cool thing to do. So there's a lot of hands on things you could do and sink your teeth into. So it was a good experience, but I probably wasn't the traditional immersed [student]. I wasn't in a frat or I wasn't, you know, in student clubs. I just had a lot of stuff going on outside of school. And by the way, I have two sisters that graduated from the CSU, San Diego State, both of my sisters, younger sisters. My brother went to UC [University of California] Riverside and then worked on his teaching credential at Cal Poly. So [it had] a lot of influence on our family, I think. And this is my second go around, later in life was, like I said, it was a lot different. Because I was here working at CSUN and just had so much more experience. But I can tell you, one thing that was really interesting there, was in that MPA [Master of Public Administration] program through Tseng [College], there were people like me, there were some others in my cohort that were pretty seasoned professionals. And then there were some people that were younger that came in either right after their bachelor's or pretty early in their career. And that was kind of an interesting thing, and pretty valuable, right? Because you have this really, really nice mix of people working together that could draw on one another. And I know, hopefully, I helped some people with some of my experience, but also, some of the younger people that were working, maybe in the municipal jobs where they were in a unionized environment, and they were actually union employees, right? I've worked in a unionized environment a long time, but I've never actually been in the union. When I came out of college, I went right into management from day one, working with unionized employees, and had a lot of respect for the unionized trades and the quality there. But it was kind of cool in the second go around to actually be talking to people removed from the workplace, about their experiences. So, ...

JK: So I think you've touched on my next question, which was as a student, how did the California State University shape your future career? Do you want to expand on that question at all? Or--?

CD: Well, I think, yeah, I mean, just specifically, from an undergrad perspective, I was a project engineer for a large contractor that was an East Coast contractor that actually had been relatively new, a few years out on the West Coast. And so I think my undergrad education, the way I'd describe it to you, was fairly broad, and kind of set me up. You know, I probably didn't know it then, but that profession, is probably not as much as it was back when I was starting out, but somewhat still, today, you kind of get thrown into

the fire, right? I think the first project I did was a Graduate School of Management we built down at UC Irvine. And [they] said, Alright kid, you're running all the concrete [laughs], you know, we're doing all the concrete construction. And I was like, Really? I'm like, "What happens if, [laughs] we're not ready?" And they're like, "Well, we got 50 concrete trucks lined up. That's going to be a lot of money getting dumped out in the wash if you don't have this all figured out." So, I think just the variety of things that I did in college probably set me up a little bit to just be able to deal with that. And the fact that I was able [to have] some work experience as well. I did that particular job when I was working in college. One of my major projects or jobs that I had, was drafting for a large Forma company. We did parking structure design. And we would design all the poor sequencing for contractors. And so I kind of learned that. I actually use some of the work that I did in my jobs as senior project things. So, it was a pretty good synergy there of work and school, that kind of, I don't know. Maybe what I'm trying to get at is it made me a little bit ready to deal with some pretty intense pressure, really. It was a very intensive job that I had, but I had a lot of fun doing it.

JK: And that's a great segue into my next question, which is [to] have you talk more about your time and experiences in the private sector.

CD: Yeah, I think everybody should work in the private sector. Those that never do, I think it just gives you such a different perspective on things. And it's funny, because I spent-- I'm trying to think how long, probably the first decade or so of my career in the private sector, then I came here, and I've been here 25 years. So I think of myself as a public sector person and an expert in that area. But I know some people that I've known my whole career, professionally, are like, You don't think like a public sector person. So I think that did shape me. There's no question about it. I remember vividly coming here, when we were working on the earthquake reconstruction. And we had a major project, I remember we had a big team working on the management of that and we had a lot of contractors working on different projects. And I remember, there were people in that, mostly the consultant management team, that didn't seem concerned enough about contractors getting paid timely. And I remember talking to people and saying, "You know, you may not think about it, because you're either someone where you're a government employee, you've always gotten your check, or you work for a big company." I spent some time solo, right? And I said, "When you don't get your--trust me--when you don't get paid on time, those invoices, and you have house payments and all that, some of these smaller contractors,..." It's a huge issue even for some of the larger ones, it's big money on a monthly basis. So I think I had a real appreciation for just caring about the outcome for every, every person that's in every entity that's involved in it. And I think that really helped me in the profession. So I would, and certainly when there is, as you can imagine in design and construction, there's a few

disputes, right [laughs]? And there's issues that come up and really difficult challenges or problems that you have to solve as a team. And so I think that private sector experience really afforded me the ability to understand sitting in the other person's shoes, and have them know that not only did I understand that, but I was going to approach issues in a way that the outcome for everybody mattered. It wasn't a battle. It was a team effort. And a lot's evolved over my career in that respect. I started out back in the days where it was kind of seen, as the owners over here and the contractors over [there]. It wasn't as much of a team effort. And the architect was in the middle. It's completely different, how we deliver projects now. And I was lucky enough to be part of influencing the evolution of some of the contracting methods that we use in the CSU with the Chancellor's Office. And I think those were absolute game changers, because right now, in modern times, we do what? You know, friends of mine in the industry would call it relationship-based contracting, right? It does matter and we come about it as a team and it's better for all parties. We get a better product. It's better financially. And it's a lot more fun to do it that way.

JK: Can you talk about your transition back into the Cal State system? So you're working in the private sector and then you return as a professional to the Cal State system? What led you to that first job with Northridge?

[00:18:55]

CD: Yeah, so I had worked for a large general contractor then I spent about four, four and a half years with a large international kind of design, engineering and architecture firm. I did some interesting things I can tell you, during that time. I actually, probably about eight years into my career I went on my own with a couple of partners and started doing a [laughs]--somehow, I got into doing theme park ride work. I did a big project at Knott's Berry Farm. And then I ended up going back out on my own and back to New York and building a roller coaster back there, which is a really, that's a story for another day. But that was really interesting. Those rides are designed in Germany and built in Italy. So I had an Italian installation crew, and they didn't speak English. And it was, it was a really, really interesting time for me. And so after that, I came back to LA, I went to work for another major general contractor. Good job. It was fine. But those are hard jobs. When you're younger, you work a lot of hours, and there's a lot of travel, obviously, and you don't know where your next project is going to be, even if it's in Southern California. And my wife was pregnant, and we were having our first child. And we did have our first child, and I just, I saw this opportunity, I can't even remember how I saw the opportunity at CSUN. It was for a manager of construction services position. And I'm like thinking, Ah, the Northridge earthquake. And that looks really interesting. It looks like a really interesting opportunity to rebuild this campus. And so I took a look at it and ended up

interviewing for it. And I guess the rest is history. But when I did that, at that age, I wasn't really thinking about being here for my career, you know? I was a construction professional, and that I probably wouldn't have conceived that I would be here. But I kind of mentioned this before. I've had all these opportunities to take on more responsibility, and to do these incredible projects and figure out [how to] be involved in all aspects of what we do, which I don't think I could have done [just] anywhere. And still today, I don't get much involved in it. I can get involved in the design process a little bit, the construction planning process, [but I'm] a lot more in the finance now. But all the things that you do, contracts and negotiations, all the things you would have to do every aspect of putting a major project like that together, you get to do here, so it's a pretty rare opportunity, I think.

JK: I know you played an instrumental role in helping the Northridge campus rebuild after the 1994 earthquake. Can you talk about the impact of the earthquake on the campus, on the community, perhaps even on you, and then your work helping the campus rebuild?

CD: Yeah, well, I came probably, I'm going to guess around a year and a half after the earthquake, something like that. And so, I wasn't here for the initial, really intense part. But when I got here the major facilities really hadn't been addressed yet. We had all the modular buildings out here. It was amazing, the way that, you know, if you think about it, the students were going to classes in these modular trailers. And we had these dome structures that we worked in. I worked in one of those for five years. It was almost like a circus tent, right? It was pretty strange. And when I got here, the campus was really disrupted, very disrupted, and so that a big focus was trying to rebuild the campus in a way that was conducive to the academic environment. Because it was really, really disruptive. So we did things back then, and this was another thing that shaped us here at CSUN, our people today. I always say they're way better than I am at it. But we learned over the years, how to do these incredibly disruptive projects in a way that doesn't disrupt the campus. And I mean, we had probably the most intense situation you could have ever had. So now, when we do a renovation of an individual building, we know exactly how to sequence it and how to work with everybody. I think there's some skill sets here at CSUN in the teams at facilities that are second to none in that regard. But the other thing that was interesting is, when I got here, not only was the earthquake reconstruction going on, but right on top of that the central plant for the campus was being constructed. And if that was the only thing to happen and there was never an earthquake it would have been, just in and of itself, an incredibly disruptive project. We tore up every roadway on campus to put in these huge piping systems all through the campus. We did all the electrical infrastructure, all the heating and chilled water

infrastructure, and then we actually built the central plant. And we had to connect to every building with both electrical and mechanical services. So, it was a pretty intense time. There wasn't, really, a dull moment there. You know the thing I learned right away was incredible, great people. And I don't think most people could ever appreciate it the way I did. The physical plant management staff at CSUN and their value in what they do. And I say that because before I came here, in the private sector, I was building what I thought were good quality buildings, right? But you leave, you know? You turn that over, and you leave. And in the first year, if there's issues, you come back. But when I came here, I'm like, oh, man, if I'm here? Like right now? If there's a problem--I've had this happen, they're having leaks, and I'm like, "What's going on guys?" And they're like, "Well, Colin, those are your pipes. You put them in 25 years ago." I'm like, So pay a lot of attention to quality and means and methods and all that. What we have with the PPM staff, when I got here, I never had that anywhere else. They knew where all the utilities were. They were always there to help. Really skilled people with [knowledge of] how to execute shutdowns, electrical shutdowns in the middle of the night, and all those kinds of things. It's an incredible resource to have and it did not exist in other places that I was in. So really, to this day, I have such great respect for the work those people do. Such a high skill level in every area there.

[00:26:15]

JK: You mentioned that it's a demanding job, a demanding career and you've also mentioned your family. Can you talk about balancing those two things across the years?

CD: It's hard. You just have to be attentive to it all the time. There's long hours, there always have been. The one thing I've tried to do, when my kids were younger--I have three kids, and I just have one that's still in college, a sophomore in college, the other two have graduated. I just had to make sure that I was there for all the sporting events and coaching and making time for that, and working it around the demands here. So, I don't think there's a silver bullet for how you do that. But I've kind of battled that my whole career. We were, my wife and I, had made decisions early on. My wife hasn't worked most of the time of our marriage, since we had kids. [I] kind of have to be honest with you. [We] decided, if I'm if I'm going to be doing this, someone's got to be there at home with the kids. And that that was hard at first. Until you get to a certain point in your career. It's difficult financially, but that worked for us. Everybody's different. But I just always tried to be there for anything that was important and never missing--I remember, that when I was a kid that's how my dad was. He was always [there]. Whatever else went on, he never missed any of my sporting events or my games. And so I thought that was important for the kids. And I just try to get home [laughs], you know, as early as I can, especially in the summer when everybody's out playing in front.

JK: Back to campus, I know you're also instrumental in the creation and construction of the Valley Performing Arts Center, now known as The Soraya. Can you talk about that project?

[00:28:20]

CD: Yeah, well, it's an incredible project. When I think back, it was probably in the year 2000 or 2001, when President Koester really was the engine behind that and so many others. Tom McCarran, who was the VP at that time, and I actually just emailed with Tom yesterday. He's coming back for the 10th anniversary of the Soraya. But he was in my chair at that time and he was my boss. There were so many people involved in figuring it [out]. We wanted to do this incredible thing that seemed like such a reach in figuring out how we could get some support, some state support, some legislative support, obviously, a lot of non-state finances. But it goes all the way back to 2000 or so. And we didn't start construction on the project, I think until it was around 2007 or 8, something like that. So all the work leading up to getting that funded. And then of course we bid the project right in the middle of the financial crisis, right? So we had these huge cost impacts. We got into construction. And then we had the state financial crisis, which a lot of people don't remember in 2008. They shut off the money supply. And we had that project in Chaparral Hall science building going on at the same time. Two major projects. I mean, the performing arts center was \$125 million project. And if you think back, I mean, that was well over, you a decade ago. So it'd be a lot more now. But I remember the Chancellor's Office going, "Okay, just shut down the projects." And we're like, "Are you kidding me?" [Laughs] We had to have them come out, and you need to see where we're at in construction. If we stop now, and it rains...It's interesting. That Performing Arts Center, people have asked me to compare it to other projects. And they always think it's strange when I say this, but it's true. I said, "the only thing I can compare it to in my career is building the central plant." And they're like "The Central Plant?" And I'm like, "Well, they're both machines, you know?" You look at the Performing Arts Center and you're going in there for a performance. It's a beautiful building, but it's a machine. It has so many parts that are, from audio systems to just the way the acoustics are built in the building. And so, it was really challenging when we had that shutdown, because we had to build a building like that, in the basement. We had all the mechanical equipment in before we even had a second-floor slab on. And I remember somebody asked, "Well, why would you do that?" And I'm like, "It's so large, there's no other way to do it. If they ever have to replace it, they're going to have to cut it out with torches, and take it out in pieces." So just things like that. But that was a great example of what I said to you about what you learn about how to build a team. When you have problems like that, I mean, we shut down a project. What does that do to a

contractor, right? In the subs [subcontractors], we actually had a fairly small steel subcontractor, structural steel, for that type of project. All the steel was in their shop. And we told them, "Oh, we're just going to stop." And they're like, "Well, what are we going to do [laughs]? We have all your steel." And so what was kind of cool about it is, the general contractor was the first one, the CW Driver [Clarence Wike Driver, General Contracting]. They came to us and said, "Hey, guys, let's pull together and figure out how we're going to do this." Instead of people retracting and protecting themselves, right? Because, you know, there's big dollar implications for everybody there. We really worked together to kind of solve it. It was the best thing about that project. I'll always say this is, it's not the finished product. As great as that building is and what it means to the campus because of the programming it can do. For me, it was the really the journey of getting there and that team of people, the architects, the engineers coming together with us as the owners, and the general contractor and the subs. That core team was like, we said it when we were doing it, we were like brothers and sisters, you know? We could really get in there and argue with each other about stuff, but everybody really liked each other. And I think that was kind of the secret to doing what we did, and making a lot of really good decisions. So as you can tell, for me, it was a really fun project. And all the people on campus. Jerry Leaders and Bob Beuker, were the original people leading that--actually running the center. And they were involved as we kind of went through. Jerry and I were really kind of the leads. Him for the Provost and me for the VP. And kind of presenting a lot of design decisions to the cabinet. It was cool.

JK: This is related. I know you helped develop the master plan for the campus Envision 2035. Can you talk about that initiative?

[00:33:45]

CD: Yeah, that was another one that had a lot of long hours to it. I remember talking at the time, my colleague up at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, who's long retired now, Bob Kitamura, had done a major master plan and I remember calling him. I said, "Hey, we're going to do this campus master plan. I Just want to pick your brain a little bit about it." And he said, "Well, you're going to work...[laughs]...you're going to work double time for about a year and a half. I'm like, "Oh!" You know, I'm laughing. He goes, "No, you will and we'll be talking later about it." And he was right. I called him later. But it was another really rewarding thing, because we really did look at the 30-year trajectory of the campus and did a really intensive study. We had a great group of consultants. AC Martin [Albert C. Martin Sr., Architectural Design] was a lead on that. He was still our campus master plan architect. We really considered every inch of this campus, all the academic growth that was going to come over the years, siting the buildings in the right places. We had, obviously, to do a major environmental impact report that anticipated

the trajectory of growth for the campus. And we had, I think, four phases through that, that showed the growth. And what's kind of neat about it is when I look back, if I open them, if I was to pull it out--it's in my cupboard over there. But if I pull the master plan book out, and I look at the phasing diagrams, you can see so many of the things that we planned that we have now executed and in the early, first decade of that. Or even the first five years. I remember, AC Martin loved to come out. And they would bring their clients out here, because they said, "It's so rewarding for us to actually do something like this, and actually see it being executed." Which really, I told them, it really meant that we all did really good work, because we didn't go back and [say], "We didn't get that right," You know? "Why did we put that over there?" It really was a comprehensive effort with the campus and this team to do it. And it set the stage for us to do the Performing Arts Center and Chaparral Hall.

One of the really interesting things, I think--because sustainability was always really an important value for the campus, and because, this is a beautiful campus--the landscape actually makes this campus. For that reason, we had to try to figure out to put about, I think it was like 1.1 million square feet of buildings over the life of the campus on that site. But we said, "Can we do it without reducing the green space?" And you meet and your first reaction is, There's no way you can do that. But, actually what we did was we had a lot of surface parking back in the early days of the campus. And so we, over time, the plan was you convert to parking structures, and that way you maintain the same amount of green space. And so I think that was a huge decision for us. And then kind of looking at how the buildings grouped together and creating hierarchy of large courtyards, and smaller ones. A lot of the things that evolved out of there, most people would never put all those things together. But when they walk around campus, you get this feeling and you're like, This is nice, and you don't know exactly why. And if you've paid attention, there's different kinds of buildings here on campus. It's not like UCLA has a little more...you know, right? You have the brick, and we have our brick, but it's not everywhere. We have some modern buildings too. Just the layout and the landscaping of this campus, and the flow are really what pulls it together. Your mind doesn't tell you that, but it feels great when you walk around, right? You know, it's a nice campus.

JK: Absolutely. Absolutely. And you picked up on something I wanted to have you talk more about, which was your work in terms of sustainability and making the CSUN campus a leader in sustainability at the college and university level?

[00:38:25]

CD: Well, there's, there's been a lot of, like everything else, a lot of people involved in that, that have done phenomenal work that I won't take credit for, but I'll talk about maybe the

early, early days for us and I think CSUN was a really early leader, I think, at the CSU in energy efficiency. So that's where it all started for us, and frankly, has always been our core, is that we really wanted to be at the forefront of that aspect of it. Because it's the right thing to do. It was innovative and we could do some cutting-edge things, and some experimentation. And just from a business standpoint, is the smartest place to put your sustainability dollars because it saves us on, obviously, energy costs. And then a lot of the things we do save us on labor. We're always stretched for our labor budgeted physical plan when we change, for example, to all LED lighting--I think Austin Eriksson, our energy and sustainability manager, told me about a year ago, we saved a million dollars the first year we did that. A million dollars in electrical costs in one year. And the other part of that we'll see over the long term is because LED lamps lasts so long, almost forever, some of them. The labor costs, you can imagine [for] this campus is huge. I mean, if you count everything, including the parking structures, you have probably seven and a half, I'm going to guess seven and a half million square feet of building area. It's pretty overwhelming when you think about it. So, that was really where we came from. But we were able to do some really innovative, interesting things. We were, I don't know, I never know if we're the first, but we were really early and in doing photovoltaic solar panels. And so the first ones that we did go all the way back to maybe 2002, or something, that we did on the open parking lots if you've seen those shaded covered ones? And we were able to use students to get involved with PPM. PPM actually did those initial installations. And we got some huge grants. And we actually own our panels. We're a little unique there is that in all of our solar installations we don't do the lease backs and there's reasons for that. But that's where we started and then the other--I don't know what year exactly it was--but when we started the Sustainability Institute, I think the campus did a really smart thing then, is at the time, the cabinet, the President decided this should really be interdisciplinary, and it shouldn't be housed at a particular college. And I think it was really smart. And so from the early days, all of us that were involved with the Institute, really made that a central theme: that we weren't going to go out and tell everybody what to do, we were going to invite them in. And it's grown and grown over the years. And I think we've done incredible things in every area, from the guard sustainability garden to what we do in food services, and just waste aversion. Absolutely every area. But we've done lots of cool things over the years. And a lot, a lot of smart people [were] involved. I give a lot of credit to Tom Brown, who was our previous plant director for many years. When I first came here and worked with him as a great colleague for a number of years. He was a mechanical engineer and he just loved doing those cutting-edge projects. So we had a fuel cell project that we did. You may or may not know. Do you know about the rainforest? We had the rainforest there. And it was really an experimental project that we had for several years there, that was just really unique. And not only was it great from a sustainability standpoint and pushing it forward, It really engaged our workforce. I mean, our plant people built that. And it was

incredible craftsmanship and a lot of pride. And I think that's been important for us, too. We've always been proud of the work.

JK: I think too, one of the things I've been impressed by with the Sustainability Institute is how much it involves students and helps them prepare for careers in environmental sustainability. That's been very impressive, I think.

CD: Yeah. A lot of good work going on there. And they've taken it to a level that, you know, I was here in our infancy working in that area. The stuff they're doing now is just—they're on every aspect of sustainability. And I've really pushed forward the educational part and the educational programs as well.

JK: So, this is related to the conversation we've been having just now, but I know that the campus has grown physically under your tenure, adding all of the square footage in terms of space, etcetera. And I was wondering if you'd talk about the challenges and opportunities of this growth, especially related to the university relationship with the surrounding community, and then also its environmental footprint.

[00:43:57]

CD: Oh, no challenges at all there [Laughs]. So, my experience here at the campus, I've had a great interaction with the community. But when I came here in the early days, the relationship wasn't what it should have been. And I think that the community felt like--look communities are always going to be concerned about impact, right? They live here. And there are shocks when you're building something. But I always got the feeling in the message that we probably didn't engage deeply enough. And I don't mean to be critical of anyone that preceded me because I know how hard it is, and you could criticize what I do. It's a lot of work to do that. But we were doing things like the master plan we talked about earlier, that was crucial. To get out and talk to the community about their issues and concerns, and also all the areas of commonality. Because the reality was, we want to make Northridge a better place. CSUN should be a point of pride for those that live in this region, and even around the campus. And there should be some synergy in what we're trying to do for this area. I was involved with the Northridge Vision Program, for example, that looked at the redevelopment of Reseda Boulevard for the city council office. I kind of kind of got that started, and I was one of the leaders in that, early on. So, I just think that's critically important. And what I learned through that was--cause it's not always easy to go out there, right? People are upset about things, and it's not always going to be a happy discussion. But when you're in it for the long haul, what happens is people become--we're working together for a number of years now, and regardless of whether it was a great conversation last time, we're back, and we're actually listening,

and we actually care. We're not there to make anybody's experience difficult. We actually care about the impacts that we have, and we want the neighbors to be proud and we want to improve the area. What started happening over time--it's a long game. And so some of the greatest people I know, and friendships I have with people in the community [laughs] probably didn't start that great. But they respected that we actually do, as a campus, care. It means something to us. And we're reasonable. And we're willing to talk about why, the goals of certain things, and growth in particular areas. And I think we've been pretty progressive. Parking has always been the biggest issue. Parking and traffic, right? Which makes sense if you live in the community. And so we've really engaged the community and in talking about, All right, where do we want to go? Because sometimes people will fight a particular project and say, Well, wait a minute, let's back up. Forget the project. What are we trying to achieve? Do we want more people riding transit? Because if we do, we've got to make transit more user-friendly. And we've got to work with MTA [Metropolitan Transportation Authority]. We're willing to do the work. So, that's been a big, certainly was on the facility side, focal point for me. And today, I think Ken Rosenthal, who's the AVP [Associate Vice President] there now for facilities and his team, and Austin, and a whole group of people, our parking people, they do a better job now. We've gotten better at this, and we're very comfortable going out. And we're not just comfortable. We feel it's really important and critical. The community is no different than the campus community. They're stakeholders here. And so I think that's been a positive thing for me. But it's a difficult one, because it takes a big commitment and a lot of time. You have to go to the neighborhood council meetings at eight o'clock at night on Tuesdays. And the master plan, we did tons of that. Lots of special community meetings and getting feedback. And the other thing that I learned there was, that's one of the most important lessons you can ever learn is, if you're willing to get in there and listen to somebody that's maybe not happy with you, but really listen, and not feel like you're just taking it. There was a couple of times where we were like, Wait, stop! What did you just say? Can you say that again? We got a couple of incredible gems from people that were really great ideas. And we're like, Yeah, we're going to take that look at it. And that we were able to incorporate. But you wouldn't get it if you weren't willing to be in those, you know, sometimes controversial discussions. So, I think our teams are have learned that lesson really well and that that's a difference maker.

[00:49:25]

JK: Yeah, being in partnership with the surrounding community rather than in contentious relationships. So, I know you've been very involved with student athletics at Northridge. Can you talk about your work in this area? And what have athletics meant to the campus and to the student experience?

CD: Yeah. So, during the time I've been here, we've felt a lot has happened. When I came, we had football. A lot of people don't remember football. We had a division I football program. We didn't have the facilities really, that we should have had for that. And so I was here when we made the decision to not have football anymore. And that was, you can imagine, a lot of controversy around that. But, I'm a huge supporter of, I think, Division I athletics, or just athletics in general, are really important for our campus. I think it's a big part of the campus experience for students. I know that was important for a couple of my kids that really wanted to go to schools where they could enjoy that. They weren't going to be Division I athletes themselves, but they wanted to be part of that. Participate in it. So I think it's huge for school spirit, no question about that. And, we have at any given time, probably about 325 to 350 student athletes. There's a lot of those student athletes that probably wouldn't go to college if they didn't have that opportunity with the scholarships. And so, that's huge, just incredibly important for them. And I've had the opportunity to be involved with trying to figure out how do we get our facilities upgraded? And we kind of went through waves of where we've invested in the various athletic facilities. It's not easy for a mid-major like us. Our annual budget for athletics for 19 teams and 325 student athletes is about 16 and a half million dollars. If you look nationally at what big programs are, it's not very much money. But I think we give. What I'm most proud of is, we've always focused on giving the student athlete the best experience they can have here. And that's important. We want to win. And it's important. You know, students have a better experience when they win. But it's always been really about that part of it, for me, and I think the current athletic administration is really great on it. Mike is the athletic director. That's where his focus has always been: on this student wellness, student athlete wellness, and their experience that they have here. It's supposed to be fun. I know my family has over the years gone to lots of events and been a season ticket holder for basketball, gone to a lot of volleyball games, all the different sports. It's a fun environment here at CSUN. It's always a challenge to get a level of involvement that we want. It's hard, and you probably know in Los Angeles and in the Valley, it's different than some places. There's a lot of things to do here [laughs]. My youngest daughter is at Oregon State in Corvallis, Oregon. They're going to get a little more support because there's not much else to do on the day they have a football game. There's more people in that stadium than actually live in the town, so... [laughs]. But I've had a lot of fun working with athletics and I when I was on the facility side, I was working more on trying to help get the projects done and things. Now I'm really trying to help them from a resource standpoint. And we've really matured in some areas. We just did a huge sponsorship partnership with Premier America Credit Union where part of it was they named the Matadome the Premier America Credit Union Arena. I think that's a big, big part of our maturation. In athletics, [it's] just leveraging those partnerships to support the program. So we've been doing a lot more of that. So that's been fun to work

on that. And what's cool about it is that particular one...[unintelligible from broadband failure].

[00:54:10]

CD: So we were talking a little bit about the corporate partnership program that we've built. And that's, I think, a big advancement for the athletic program. But what I also think is really interesting and progressive about it is that these partners that we brought in, we've looked for those that are aligned with CSUN in a lot of ways. Premier America--to partner with a credit union made a lot of sense for us because they're member owned. They're not-for-profit entities. And they're really trying to maximize services for their constituents, their members. But also, they have a lot of the same regional goal alignments that we have at CSUN. And so, because of that, we're able to build sponsorships across the campus. They weren't just interested in athletics. So what we really found is a huge benefit is, it starts the public campus together with athletics, because athletics was certainly a big component of that agreement. But The Soraya is in the mix for that. Alumni Relations is a big part of it. A lot of other areas of campus that they really want to be involved with. And we've seen this with some of our other partners as well. So, I think that's a way that it can be very positive for us. Because one of the challenges with athletics is always really trying to embed it into the fabric of the campus. Sometimes people will have a tendency, and even people in athletics will have a tendency, to look at it as a separate thing over here. Well in my division, it's the one area that has students in it, [laughs]. We have 325 students there. So if anything, it should actually be more embedded. And so we've really tried to look at all these different ways to connect athletics on the campus because I think [it's] not just a source of pride for us, but really, we have things on a college campus--this is one of the reasons I'm probably still here 25 years later is a college campus is like a city, right? We have every aspect that a city would have. We have a police department, we run all our own facilities and utilities. And we have this athletic program, and we have The Soraya and we have all these incredible things that you wouldn't have almost anywhere else you could ever work. So, athletics is just one part of it, that I think, that that's really the challenge for me going forward, really. And as we're coming out of COVID and everybody's trying to figure out what's the future of work, and the "great resignation" and all that, it's kind of getting back to basics. We need the people that see value in that and want to be here. It's not just about attracting employees. This is a unique experience that you cannot get somewhere else. You may be able to make more money somewhere else, but you can't get the breadth of what you have here. And so, I think athletics is just one more part of that, but it's an important part.

JK: Related. A lot of the focus for the Cal State system as a whole, and for CSUN as well, has been around student success and increasing graduation rates. Can you talk about how your work intersects with those goals?

[00:57:51]

CD: Yeah, well, obviously, on graduation rates and equity, my work is central to that, right? At the cabinet level, I'm really the person that's charged with figuring out how we're going to get the resources to accomplish these difficult goals. And how do we balance things and make the tradeoffs? And so, a lot of the work that I do is centered around that. It's always interesting when you talk about erasing equity gaps, and inclusion. All those kinds of things. I can contribute in, actually, in different ways. And other people can and I have to stay focused on that because it can make a big difference. And so, I'm trying to help people make decisions about where to use the resources, which will actually be the most effective. That's a central part of the job that I do working with the cabinet, working with the University planning and budgeting group, which is stakeholders across campus working on the budget. And just constantly looking at different sources and opportunities. And how we can leverage things to meet those goals and to make sure that our budget, finance decisions, reflect our values as a campus. And that's a lot harder than what it sounds like. This is a big campus. Just the general operating budget is probably 525 million a year. And if you add in all the auxiliaries, it's well north of 700 million a year. It's a big operation. So that's probably the most challenging and fun thing that I do, because I can work with the president, the provost, the VP for student affairs, all my other colleagues on what really moves the needle. Where are you trying to go? It's not just about putting dollars here or there to little projects. It's really backing up and saying, How do we have a sustainable flow of resources going forward, that is going to—you can't meet these goals in one year. So that's really the biggest place that I can contribute there.

JK: I know you oversee campus policing as well. And so I'd like to have you talk a bit about just that experience and that work. And then also reflect on [how] the nation is grappling with policing and issues of race after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. So you could talk broadly about your oversight of campus policing and your perspective on it. And then talk more specifically about how that might have shifted after May of 2020.

[01:00:57]

CD: Yeah, you may know that we've recently done, and actually, I think, you're just beginning to have some public meetings around the study that we just did, as a campus. We had

an outside consultant look at how we can look at ways to have our campus police feel more integrated with the campus. But I'll back up and say, I'm incredibly proud of the police force that we have here at CSUN. It's, I think, in many ways, and I've worked with the last three police chiefs on this, we can be an example for what policing should be. It's different on a college campus. A lot of the things that we do, we work closely with housing and Student Affairs in a developmental way. And so it's a big advantage to have a police force that is geared that way on campus, which is very different than a municipal police force. And I think we've had great leadership and a lot of really great officers over the years. So when the George Floyd murder happened [and] the protests started, we actually had some attention. We actually had protests here in Northridge that came to our police department. And our police chief was out speaking to people. We didn't shy away from that. But I think there was a general feeling about policing that really didn't differentiate what happened in Minneapolis, from what I believe we have done, have always done, here at Cal State Northridge, which is much different. But it's something you have to work at every day. We have to take that very seriously. We do a lot of training. And we do a lot of work with the departments, but you have to be attentive to communicating with the constituents who may have different feelings about police. And so that's probably, I think, in the wake of this report that we just had done, it has some really good recommendations about maybe how we can begin to improve and build on those relationships and engage with some of the areas that might not be as welcoming, and might have concerns, in some cases legitimate concerns, with policing in general. So we really do want to work on that. Some of the things we've done in the past [are] small things. We have dogs on campus, you may know we have two dogs now. Our dogs are their sniffers. They're not police. In fact, the one dog, Daisy, if you've seen the yellow one, the yellow Lab [Labrador]--she'll lay on her back and want you to pet her stomach. So, [laughs] she's not what people think of as a police dog. But we have them, we use them to clear venues, and they can smell explosives and those kinds of things. Very valuable police tools. But what I was going to say is, over the years, we've always had events. Meet the dogs and come out. The reason we do that is it humanizes our officers that are out there with people [and with the] dogs. And they'll come up and talk. We really need the campus community. At the end of the day, we're here to protect this university and to serve the University. And that's the reality, when, if there's a threat, these are the people that are going to be out there putting their life on the line. And we train for that. But we need people to be comfortable that that's what they're there to do, and that they're not a threat, but they're actually part of the community, and the ones that you really need when there's difficult times. And we want people to be comfortable to come to us and to tell us, Hey, I heard something, or This didn't seem right. So, we have a lot of things that we'll probably be doing. Mental health is another big burgeoning area for us. It's just over the course of the pandemic, we've had a lot more issues with mental health response. And so there's probably better ways

that we can do that. We recognize that and actually welcome [it]. By the way, you should know this, we've always partnered very closely with the counseling center and in threat assessment. Student issues when they're struggling. So it is different on a college campus. It is a team effort and there's a lot of respect in all those areas. And there's probably a lot of things that people don't see that happen. We want people to see those more, and it's probably incumbent on us to communicate better there. But we also will be, I think, looking at some ways to improve how we handle those situations. There are things that we can do. So one thing, I think, our Police Chief Fred Fernandez and his team and myself, is, we're not going to shy away from this communication at all. I think it's a really important time and, and there's some valuable insights that we can hear that we can actually incorporate and just be better, and better serve the community. And that's what we're going to do.

[01:06:57]

JK: You anticipated my next question a bit, but we are still in the midst of the global COVID 19 pandemic? And can you talk about how the pandemic impacted the CSUN community, particularly your work and how your work evolved to address the challenges of the pandemic?

CD: Yeah, well, I mean, it's unprecedented, obviously. I never thought I'd see anything like this in my career. You know, to overnight, basically go remote. I remember, the day before we went fully remote, I think it was like March 13, or something, I'm like, This is coming. This is going to happen. And I called all my senior team together and had IT [Information Technology] come over and said, "Hey guys. You know that Zoom thing we've had, but we've never really used it? You know, [laughs] we use it for phone calls, sometimes? We're going to have them come over and teach us how to use it, because I think we may need it." And the next day is when it's like, Everybody go home! And to think that we didn't come back, for many of us, for that length of period of time was amazing. So, there's some good to that. We could have been sitting here 15 years from now and never would have realized what we can do remotely and moved our technology. So that was positive, but it's been incredibly difficult and stressful for all of us. I know in admin and finance, we had a group of people—we were talking about police, we talked earlier about the physical plant--so our officers, our landscapers, our custodians, our electricians, carpenters, plumbers, all those people have been here the entire time. And so it's been a struggle to have them working [with] other people working remote and then it goes on so long that it's really hard for people to acclimate themselves back to campus and realize--for me, the biggest challenge has been just a drain on people. Because when you're working on a screen all day it's exhausting. You don't have the personal connections. And it went on so long that the concern I've had is

people [had] forgotten why it's important for them actually to be face to face. Now that we're back, and a lot of people are working hybrid in the offices in my office, but people are really starting to reengage or realize what we kind of knew: that my interaction with you for 10 minutes here probably was worth two hours, you know? When we're working together, there's an energy. And that's a real thing. That's what people are geared to do. So, in a strange way now, we're in that relearning phase. And we're challenged by the fact that a lot of people will say, "Well, I work, you know, I'm more efficient at home", which is often true, to be honest with you. "And I don't have to drive in and I'm not distracted." It's like, Okay, so that works for you. How does it work for your colleagues and the university overall, right? Does culture matter? Do your colleagues need you? Is it more efficient for them to be able to walk down to your thing [desk] and look over your shoulder on the screen? So that's a big challenge now, but just overall, to get back to your basic question, it was a very intense time. For me, I don't know what to say other than for a lot of us, it kind of doubled the responsibilities because you're running a pandemic operations team, on top of running a campus, and just dealing with all the COVID issues from testing and vaccinations and safety protocols that we had at the physical plant, and deciding what to do and what not to do, and tracking data and managing our higher education relief funds. H.E.R funds that we received at this campus were \$264 million in total for CSUN over a couple of years. A little more than half of that went to student grants. But you can imagine all that money we spent. I mean, there was a lot going on. Thank God we had it. We would have been in real trouble if we didn't get those relief funds. But it's hard to reflect on how it was difficult for everybody, and very stressful. Everybody's, of course, dealing with personal issues to through that. People were dealing with sick loved ones and childcare and ... [pauses] I'm hoping that we get back next fall and things are a little bit more normal. But it'll be challenging for us financially for a while here. It's hit enrollment on this campus, not so not as much as some others, but it's definitely hit us. In some of our areas that are resource supported: our auxiliaries and our enterprise funds, food service, housing. Housing lost probably, oh, at least \$25 million in revenue because of students leaving for a while. And parking will probably never be the same. People are always upset about having to pay parking fees. Over the years I've had to explain to them it's a fully self-supportive program that receives no state funding and has to pay for all its facilities. And now we're in a situation where our parking levels are, even today, are less than 50% of what they were. Our shift now is looking at what's it going to be long term? Is what we built, which we never conceived of--we were very solid, financially--is it sustainable, long term? So we have to look at all those different areas. But that's the fun of it, right? If it was easy, it wouldn't be fun.

[01:13:30]

JK: So I think we'll end with some kind of big picture questions. We've talked about the earthquake, the pandemic. So I wanted to know if you wanted to reflect on some of the big challenges that you and the campus have faced during your tenure. And we've touched on the financial crisis of 2008, cuts in state funding, which I think has never been fully restored and other financial challenges. So what challenges have you faced and how have those challenges shaped your work?

CD: Yeah, I mean, we touched on a lot of that, sort of the ones that were centered around particular points in time or events. I would say just a general theme that is always a challenge for the CFO on a campus is, we live in an environment where there will never be adequate resources. Never. Right? We're always going to be challenged to be looking at building resources to be driving a campus to make the best decisions and tradeoffs and use of resources and efficiency. It's very difficult to compete financially with the private sector for labor. And, I would say when you're in a public university, in particular, in California, where the budget is very politically driven. And we have always had an environment in the CSU, where student fees, which are about half of our revenue for our operating fund; they don't change annually. And so, we haven't had a fee increase since, I think, 2017. So when we get increases on the state appropriation, whatever percentage that is, the governor gives us 5%, that's really two and a half of our budget. And then of course, our costs are higher than that. So I think that's really the umbrella challenge for me. And, frankly, for the CSU, is to provide a high quality, excellent education and excellent experience for students in a very constrained environment. We're incredibly efficient. When we've compared ourselves financially to peers across the country, we're doing a lot for our students without a lot of revenue. And that's not going to change, I would say, anytime soon. I don't know if it will ever change. So, to me, I'm pretty proud. And we started out talking about my history with California and the CSU. I'm really proud of what we have, and value it and think we have great institutions here in the CSU. That's really what I'm committed to is figuring out, constantly, how we serve the student body. But also how we just do that in a way where they're receiving an education that is absolutely excellent. And that we're not an institution that is just kind of rolling along. You know, we can't be bureaucrats. We have to be a lot more. In my tenure here, [we have been] just much more entrepreneurial in how we approach higher education. And we talked about a lot of the things that we're doing now that are different, but from everything, as to how we develop projects, and public private partnerships, and sponsorships and different grant revenue sources of leveraging things, and just making smart decisions. That's really the challenge. And that part is fun, I think, because it's very strategic. I like the fact that a lot of the things we've been able to do here, we can share with others. That's the other thing I love about the CSU is I have 23 colleagues on other campuses doing what I'm doing. And many of them I've known for a long time. And we really do use each other every day as

resources. Every day. You wouldn't have that in a lot of other places. And I think you need it in an environment like we have.

[01:18:13]

JK: My final question, what are your hopes for the University moving forward?

CD: What are my hopes? I think it's really what I said there is that CSUN has always moved forward since I've been here and you look back and there's some things that we've done that seem like really incredible challenges. How are we going to get through this? From the earthquake, to building a performing arts center of the magnitude we have, and all the other things that we've done. We've added lots of housing facilities and programs. The programs growth that we've done has been phenomenal. Really it comes down to-- my hope for the campus is that as you face these challenges going forward, it's not going to get any easier, that we continue to build the quality of what we provide for students here at CSUN, and in our system. And stay committed to that and don't allow it to erode. But actually, if I came back hopefully 20 years after I retire--I hope I'm still around--that, I would say, Wow, look what they've done! It's incredible! You know? So continuing to, I guess, build on success. And that's been our history here while I've been here is, I still hear from people every day about this in the system and in the system office, CSUN recognized for its resilience, and just the unique ways that it's approached problems before. And there's a lot of respect for what this campus does. So, my hope for the campus is that we maintain that spirit that we have always had. I know since I've been here we used to talk about that spirit from the earthquake, but I just think it's continued. And hopefully we maintain that and then as we bring new people and new ideas in and we become more diverse that we build on it and bring people that are really going to contribute and take it to the next level.

JK: Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences and insights today.

[01:20:35]

[End of interview]