

Oral History Transcript

John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection

Interviewee David Benson = DB

Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB

Interview conducted on April 27, 1990 at an unspecified location

Transcribed by: Nataly Torres, Roxana Ortiz

Edited by: Philip Walsh

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Biographical Note:

David Benson earned his Ph.D. in Kinesiology from UCLA, and came to San Fernando State Valley College in 1961 as a professor of physical education. He soon moved into administration, serving in several positions until hired as president of Sonoma State University. He had a reputation for working well with faculty, perhaps in part because he believed that faculty, rather than administration, should hire and review their colleagues, and make decisions on curriculum. He passed away in 2013 at age 81 of kidney disease.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, Side A

JB: Let's review the faculty and the administrative positions you've held in Northridge.

DB: Okay. I came in 1961 as assistant professor of physical education, joined the very small department when the college was about forty-eight hundred FTE [full time equivalent] so it was, it was growing but it was still fairly small. I taught P.E. and for about 6, 7 years and served on the faculty senate and served as secretary for the faculty and I was elected vice president of the faculty. I was fairly active in faculty governance and in committees. And in 1967, Del Oviatt asked me if I would come in as his assistant. And he had had two assistants, one in the area of curriculum and one in the area of what you'd call day-to-day management of the schedule and budget and so on. And Chuck Manly was the assistant and Chuck Manly had gone to Chico to look at a job up there for a year. So, Del Oviatt knew me because I had been somewhat critical of the administration in some respects but not in a negative sense, just pointing out that they can do things better, so he said if you want to help and do things better why don't you come in and help me for a year, this job won't go anywhere, you're not going to stay in administration, but at least you might be of some help. So, in '67 I went in as his assistant, I stayed as his assistant for two years and by that time of course we were in the '69 and a good deal of turmoil was beginning to develop over ethnic issues, over war issues, over the student turmoil issues, free speech issues, and all of that. And there was a position created as a Dean of Academic Administration, and I applied for that, I think that was the title, but I'm not sure of the title at that point, in any case I was appointed

dean and I was working then in the area of, um, curriculum, I think in fact the first deanship I had was Dean of Academic Planning. And I was working on the curriculum side of the house and Bob Lamb was working on resources. And Bob Lamb then went to Chico, and so we had the problem of replacing Bob Lamb in resources. And as I recall we felt, Del Oviatt and I felt that it would be difficult. By then it was Paul Walker, Paul Walker was vice president. We felt it would be difficult to find someone in the area of resources but there were many people who could handle the curriculum job, the academic plowing job. And so, I remember going to lunch with Harry Finestone and asking Harry if he would be willing to take the job as Dean of Academic Planning, and then I told Paul that I could move back into the area of resources because that is what I had done with Del Oviatt for a year or two. So, they made that switch, I simply became Dean of Academic Administration, Harry Finestone was appointed Dean of Academic Planning and then the two of us worked on the two sides of the job for some time. Then in 1972, after Paul became Executive Vice President, President Cleary came around, I can't remember what year, '70 or '71, and he wanted Paul to be the Executive Vice President and so then there was the search for the academic vice presidency and I applied and I was hired as Academic Vice President in 1972. I stayed in that job, really throughout my period, the title changed to Vice President and Provost, Executive Vice President and Provost, in '81, and then I left in '84. So, I had held Assistant to the Vice President, Dean of Academic Planning, Dean of Academic Administration, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Executive Vice President and Provost over those twenty-three years that I was at Northridge.

JB: It's an extraordinary range of positions, and one of the things that it gave you was an advantage, a vantage point on different styles of administration, there's a different administrative pattern, modes. I wonder if you would compare the administrative styles of Ralph Prator, Del Oviatt, and Jim Cleary. Can that be done?

[00:04:58]

DB: Oh yes, I knew obviously, Ralph Prator the least well, he was president, he was a little bit more remote as a president than I think Jim Cleary was, or Del Oviatt was, but- uh. And I didn't have, most of the time that Ralph Prator was in the position I was a faculty member, so it was somewhat further removed. Ralph, as I remember him was a man who delegated very well, he depended on Del Oviatt and Warner Masters. He came out of the community college system and he was not familiar with faculty governments in the four-year system as well as others were who had come over from LA State. So we had a situation with a president who came from a 2-year situation, community college situation, and a faculty who had experience in the 4-year setting, and who had definite ideas about how faculty governance should play a role. So Prator was learning, I think, how to be a president under faculty governance, because faculty governance in 1960 in the community colleges didn't exist as an entity. The curriculum was set and determined by administration, people who were hired by the administration. Ralph, I think adjusted that very well. He chaired the senate for the first year or two because that was the

mode that time. He set up the senate, the president actually chairs the senate. And uh, but he slowly began to see the people who were in the leadership roles in the faculty had a point, and he allowed it to happen, he allowed a governance structure on that campus I think to develop. His own style was one of being fairly remote and cool. Del Oviatt had a very different style; Del was a very person-oriented person. Person who had, always had a thousand balls up in the air at one time. Very hard to get to, I was in his office. I served in right next door to him as his assistant and there were sometimes two or three days at a time, I couldn't get to see him for five minutes, because he was just always on the go with people, mostly on campus, talking to deans, and talking to faculty, and sometimes off campus doing something. But he was very, very—he was an old-style administrator, by that I mean he believed that the faculty had a role, he believed the institution was terribly important, he believed he was in a position where he had to make fundamental decisions, primarily about who was hired and where the money was spent. He obviously allowed the faculty to have a heavy say in the curriculum, but when it came to information, he didn't believe the faculty deserved to have all the information, particularly about budgets. And he ran his shop sort of out of his back pocket, he depended on people to come into his office and request if they needed something, whether it was the department chair, a division head, there was a sort of steady stream of people trying to petition, the dean or the vice president but his role(??). And so, he sort of dealt out of his back pocket, if he liked the program you proposed he would find a way of supporting it, but he never saw the total budget. He always gave out the allocations to the deans individually, and so they never saw the total budget, they just saw what their portion was. In that sense, it was nothing malevolent about that, he just felt that was how administration worked and that was very typical of that period of time. When I came in as his assistant, and began to share budget information with the deans, he was quite concerned. He allowed it to happen, and I had some arguments with him about, you know, if this is a public institution, why not share the information, and then justify what we're trying to do. He was a little reluctant to do that, but he eventually he allowed me to do it and it worked out fine. Jim Cleary, I think, was the first president, and certainly the first major administrator, who came in with a fundamentally different concept of the institution. He had come in from Wisconsin; he knew what a large state university can be in terms of research function, in terms of teaching, in terms of outreach, in terms of all these things, in terms of even athletics, and so he came with a different vision than I think Ralph Prator had or Del Oviatt had. Ralph and Del still had a little bit of the teacher college mentality. Jim came in with a university mentality and that, I think that was reflected in how he saw things and how he always tried to move for expansion of program, expansion of student body, expansion of campus, expansion of concept, but he also came out of the Wisconsin system which was very reliant on faculty, faculty choice. Ralph—I mean Jim tried to in fact, impose some of the traditions of Wisconsin on our faculty, relative to personnel actions, and some things, and I remember he came into one dean's meeting, tried to convince the deans that our system of promotions and salary increases and so on should allow more faculty involvement, and he had a complicated scheme of having faculty from various disciplines evaluate faculty in another discipline, so that if you were

historian your promotion wouldn't be determined by historians, but it would be determined by people in addition to historians who had a—some historical background, who could evaluate the work, but it was always broadening the kind of base, because I think that Wisconsin that was pretty typical. Personnel committees did not always come just from a department, it came from the best people who could judge that individual's work. Well, that idea was not ever accepted, and because the deans realized that it was just not transportable to San Fernando Valley State College at that point. But Jim did bring in that vision, and in terms of governance, in terms of style, he believed totally in collegiality, he believed that the faculty must determine what goes on, he believes in certain majority vote. He's a much better, he really is much better at conducting a meeting where he feels that the majority vote can determine the issue, than he is the kind of leader that says this is what I believe should happen, then tries to move the group in that direction, and I've seen that working with him closely over years, that he's a different kind of a leader in that respect. He does not have, even though I said he had an image of the campus growing into the university, on specifics, he did not have, and does not, have a tendency to say this is the direction we should go. So, he doesn't go out on point on issues, he reacts to the issues, he tries to serve as an effective chair and making sure that various expressions of opinion are made, and then he hopes to reach consensus or a clear majority. Very, very, very difficult for Jim as it is for many of us to deal with issues that are very tightly described or equally or where opinions are equally held. Jim's also very adept with uh handling confrontation and handling small groups of people who would come into his office during the turmoil years. He would listen to them, everyone who left felt that they had had a full hearing. I think it's interesting that many times people from very different sides would leave the meeting feeling that they had won the argument. It's because of Jim's ability to conduct himself in a meeting and listen so thoroughly, and never show his hand until he had finally made his decision. All very interesting people.

[00:14:09]

JB: And quite different styles.

DB: Very different styles.

JB: During the 1970's, especially during that decade, I think it's accurate to say our campus had a reputation for running lean, we had a high asset bar, I believe we had the highest in the system.

DB: Yeah.

JB: Why was this, what led to that?

DB: Well, mostly I think it was the history of the place, as it grew from the sixties, in the sixties, it started out with faculty from LA State, and as I understand it, I wasn't among the first

faculty, but I was there by 1960, and it was the faculty who wanted to create primarily a liberal arts institution, and a liberal arts institution means a heavy emphasis on the humanities and the social sciences. Which by our formulas in the system, we were still at that point working with the staffing formula where every class—we still have it, but it's not quite as restrictive now—every class had a course load and so on. So, in the early days, history as a discipline, most of the classes were C1 and so which meant they could be taught in any size up to room capacity. So, if you taught an American History class and you had a room for two hundred then you could teach that class. It wasn't until later in the sixties that that was changed to a C2 class with a limit of fifty. So as the curriculum developed, it developed primarily as a lecture curriculum. We had sciences, but it was not a science-oriented program that emphasized the laboratories. We had a very small engineering program, we had no agriculture, we had a small home economics department, so those areas of the curriculum, we had no nursing program, those areas of the curriculum which normally would lower the student-faculty ratio for an entire institution. The sciences, the laboratories, the agriculture, the engineering, the kinds of specialized programs, we had very few of those. So, what we ended up with was a program which was perhaps over ninety percent lecture and we were budgeted for our lecture program just like all the other programs. It's just that we had a higher percentage of lecture programs and so the state was giving us our fair share, but we ended up with the highest student-faculty ratio in the system.

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JB: How did the administration feel about that?

DB: Well, I felt, I guess, I can only speak for myself, I tried to, I tried to work the staffing formula. That is, for part of my life, and my early administrative years, I was responsible for the staffing formula, and the staffing formula had some leeway in it. When it was down, in my early years, we had to forecast every class. So, if it was History 150, we had to project the specific enrollment for History 150, and on the basis of that projection we would get faculty specifically budgeted for History 150, but obviously we could move them around. So, in the first few years I realized that I could, and I took pride in this that I didn't tell very many people about it, but I took pride that I knew I was making more than my salary, several times over for the institution, by squeezing the formula as much as I could within the constraints that were placed on it. And so, every year I would try to get as many positions through the formula process. And I think our system, with the help of Bob Lamb and myself and others did that, but we still ended up with the highest student-faculty ratio because we had this enormous proportion of lectures. Then we began to try some other devices, there was a move to try and work with the Chancellor's Office to get the four-unit classes in the social science, that was somewhere in the mid I suppose mid '70s but they denied that.

JB: I recall that well.

DB: Yeah, they denied that, but that was a way of attempting to get the faculty ratio improved somewhat, or the load somewhat. We had one huge advantage all through the 70's, and leading into the 70's, and that was we tended to keep growing. We had two periods of level enrollment. If you look at over a five-year block, there was a—early 70's we were around eighteen thousand, and we just bounced around seventeen-nine, eighteen thousand. We're at a level in those five years, and then we took a swing up to almost nineteen thousand at the last half of the 70's and so we had some positions coming on but we didn't have much leeway to work with, and some of the departments, history was one, some of the other social sciences had projected enrollments beyond what we were able to achieve and so we ended up with a tight situation in some of the programs. And that happened throughout the system, and so it was hard to make accommodations on any given campus. As I said earlier, at Sonoma State, we couldn't make accommodation adequately, and they eventually laid off tenured faculty. The hardest decision I think I had was one year when we still had people coming up for tenure in history, and there were approximately three, I think faculty who were scheduled to receive tenure and we knew by all statistics that the university probably wouldn't need those tenured faculty in the next several years so the issue became, should we deny tenure and reappointment on the basis that those individuals were not needed even though they were fine individuals. We eventually gave them tenure and there was never a time when we had to lay them off and I was thankful for that.

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JB: How was that decision arrived at, if I may ask.

DB: Well, as I recall I had many discussions with Cleary and I had discussions with the faculty and I had discussions with the individual faculty. I can remember discussions, I know Ron Davis was one of the individuals who was involved. I can remember talking with Ron and others at that period. Ron made the argument—I think it was almost persuasive at the time—it's hard to say your defending tenure by not according tenure. And I was trying to make the argument that, administratively, it was our task to protect tenure, and we couldn't assure ourselves at that point that if we accorded tenure that we would not in the next two or three years have to lay off tenured people, whereas if we didn't accord tenure, we would not destroy tenure. Well, Ron's point was, you're arguing to protect tenure, but you're denying it in the first instance. And I think that argument and the just the general belief that those were good people had something to offer and had worked their probationary period well. I think we just took a chance.

JB: There was that plunge, that drop in the early 70's, that you point out down to the mid 70's, we actually went through a drop in FTE in '74. And a lot of us, I was in administration at the time, and you and I were talking regularly. The dean's council was talking about this, it seemed, practically every meeting.

DB: Yeah.

JB: We were wondering where we were heading. There were some really bleak prognoses for the entire, you know, foreseeable future of the campus as you recall.

DB: Right.

JB: Bill Bowen was issuing jeremiads about that, the future of CSUN, and people were very worried. What was your prognosis at that time as to where we were heading? Did you see the upturn coming, for example?

DB: Well, I didn't see the upturn coming because at that point I was not sophisticated enough in my analysis to see the big trends in both higher education and in California population and so on. But I am by nature optimistic, and so I never felt that it was likely that we would have to lay off. I wasn't sure of myself, but I just felt optimistic that we could weather it, and I felt that eventually we could get back on track. So, I wasn't terribly pessimistic, but it was very, there were very, times when we were very concerned, because I certainly did not want to be associated with laying off tenured faculty. And we made several attempts to try and find ways of relocating within the system and we made appeals to other campuses to see if they could use any of our faculty and so on. There was not quite enough cooperation within the system because everyone was in the same boat. They all saw the same sort of decline and they couldn't understand it but uh, so there wasn't the kind of cooperation among the campuses that could've been there but I think we were, from my standpoint, I was concerned but I remained optimistic.

JB: Would it be fair to say that it was that optimism that served in a little of anything like adequate forecasting tools at that point?

DB: Oh yeah.

JB: There were no forecasting tools?

DB: Very few forecasting tools. Once you—because we were looking at local data, and if your local data turns down, the only thing you can do is project further, you know, if you're taking projections on the base of your local data. I think even then if we had been looking at the statewide projections and the national projections and recognizing the inflow of immigrants, recognizing the national trend of students, and the inflow of California in migration, we would've felt more comfortable and more confident. The difficulty is partly that the Department of Finance in Sacramento is always by its nature conservative, in its estimates, in terms of cost for the State of California. So, they're in the best position to see if growth is going to occur, and yet by disposition, they don't want to show that growth is going to occur, because it's going to cost the state of California more money. So, I think even in the 70's, we could've had a little more support. In our understanding, if the state demographic experts had pointed out, Don't

worry because people are coming to California, they're continuing to come to California, this is an economic slump that is going to pass. There's no doubt that, I can't remember the year that Reagan was first governor, but the first year of Reagan's term certainly had something to do with it because he rolled back the financial support in that first year by something that was, I can't remember the exact figure but I remember he talked about ten percent, and so the system did take a big cut and that made it much worse at that time.

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JB: When did you realize we were out of the woods?

DB: Oh, I can't put my hand on it, I can't put my finger on it, because we had, even throughout the late 70's and early 80's, we still had the situation where some departments were unable to hire and they still had a surplus, on any statistical analysis, they still had a surplus of tenured faculty over their needs. I think that went on, all the way through to the point I left, but certainly by the late 70's, early 80's it was pretty clear we were going to continue to grow, and I was I became a spokesperson within the system or within the campus. I was trying to hold the enrollment at that point, because we were running out of buildings, and I didn't want to put those other pressures on the campus that result from increase growth. The campus at Northridge I think is a wonderful campus, and it's certainly a wonderful university. It did grow too fast to absorb all of the new faculty, all the new studies, all the new curriculum, and, that very rapid growth in the 60's and early 70's that brought it from zero to fifteen thousand or sixteen thousand. I think it was eighteen thousand or so by the time I became vice president. That very rapid growth was somewhat counterproductive. When we then hit a flat period, because we had a flat period, then, the faculty began to fight for their share of the curriculum, and that destroyed, in some small measure, it destroyed the curriculum, but it destroyed the ability of the campus to maintain what I'd consider a comprehensive core in the general education, because everyone had to have a slice of the pie. And it became more important for every discipline to have a slice of the pie, and so the I think the campus probably used the curriculum a little more than it should have, in terms of trying to adjust to faculty needs and job needs.

JB: Does the GE program reflect that, do you think, as it was revised?

DB: Yes, I think the GE program at Northridge was more responsive to faculty needs than it was to comprehensive, uh, curriculum.

JB: I'm going to change tapes now, okay?

DB: Want a little more coffee?

JB: I was just going to ask you the same.

[END OF TRACK 1]