

Oral History Transcript

CSUN Leaders

Interviewee Debra Hammond = DH

Interviewed by Jessica Kim = JK

Interview conducted on April 28, 2023 via remote video conferencing technology

Transcribed by Albert Dubin and Steve Kutay

Total Time: 1 hour, 35 minutes, 30 seconds

[00:00:00]

JK: Today is Friday, April 28, 2023. This is Jessica Kim. I'm in Los Angeles, California and on a zoom call with Debra L. Hammond, executive director of the University Student Union at California State University, Northridge. We're about to begin recording her oral history. This interview will become part of the Campus Leadership Oral History Project. Miss Hammond has served as the executive director of the University Student Union or USU since 1993. The USU is a 501 C three nonprofit organization governed primarily by students and with the mission to provide the student body with educational, personal, and leadership development opportunities, and to promote equity, inclusion, and well-being while encouraging social justice advocacy. In service to this mission, Debra oversees the Student Recreation Center, the Veterans Resource Center, the Oasis Wellness Center, the Pride Center for LGBTQ students, and the Dream Center for undocumented students to name but some of the USU's initiatives. Debra began her educational professional career at Rutgers College of Rutgers University in New Jersey. She earned her bachelor's degree in sociology in 1979, and began her career in Student Affairs at Cooke College, also part of Rutgers University. She went on to earn a master's degree in educational administration at California State University of Los Angeles in 1994, where she also served as the director of the University Student Union. She came to CSUN in 1993 to direct the USU and has led the organization's significant growth over the past 30 years. Some notable accomplishments include a \$15 million renovation of the University Student Union in 2006, opening the \$60 million Student Recreation Center in 2012, followed by a \$5 million campus wellness center in 2015. She is currently overseeing the design and construction of a new student union facility \$130 million project that will include increased lounge and study spaces, event and meeting spaces, and a center to help meet students' basic needs, as well as a center for unity in race intersectionality, and social and environmental justice. Debra is also part of the faculty at CSUN, teaching courses in the Michael D. Eisner College of Education where she received the Outstanding Professor of the Year award in 2012. Her exemplary work has resulted in a number of additional awards, including the Wang Family Excellence Award, the highest award presented to an administrator by the CSU. She has also received awards for mentorship, business leadership and for outstanding

service to the Association of College Unions International. Beyond higher education, Debra has also worked to support her community, including serving on the boards of a number of nonprofit community-based organizations. She's also a member of the African American Board Leadership Institute, which works to increase the number of African Americans who serve on nonprofit and corporate boards and governmental commissions. It's an honor to be with you today, Debra, to have you tell your story and share your insights.

DH: Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

JK: Let's start right at the beginning. When and where were you born?

DH: I was born in Plainfield, New Jersey. I'm from the East Coast. January 15, 1957. And I am actually a twin. So, I have a fraternal twin named Craig. And actually, we have two sets of twins in our family and we're 13 and a half months apart.

JK: And can you tell me about your parents and your family background?

DH: My dad's name is Luther and my mom's name is Dolores. They're both deceased now. As I said before, I have two sisters who are also twins. We're 13 and a half months apart. So, it was something else (laughs). My mom is from New York and my dad was from Plainfield, New Jersey. My mom was a dietitian. She actually went to college. So, she went to an HBCU (Historically Black College and University). She graduated as valedictorian for her college. She went to Hampton Institute, now called Hampton University in Virginia. And she was allowed to go to college because my uncle, who's her older brother, decided he was going to go into the military. So, they had saved some money. And she was allowed to go, in air quotes. And my dad worked as a building inspector for the city of Plainfield. He was also a carpenter. So, he made a lot of the things that we had in our house like a media center and he actually, at one point, converted a bus into a mobile home. Yeah, the whole thing. So, his focus was always on quality. Yeah, my mom was the nurturer. He was the focus on quality and fun. He's the person who brought the laughter to the room. When we'd come home from college, all those things, there'd be people at the house because they were hanging out with my dad (laughs). And then my mom was cooking and, you know—the whole thing. So, it was it was a great experience. My dad was the one who created opportunities for us in terms of going to different places. We always had a family vacation, even if it was around the corner. One time he took us to a hardware store to have microwave hot dogs for the first Amana Radarange, the first microwave that came out. So, that's the kind of person that he was. So, it was great. It was wonderful.

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JK: It sort of felt like he was a curious person and inspired that sense, Let's find new experiences and let's do them together.

DH: He definitely was curious about everything. He could talk about anything. He was just interesting, and interested. Both of those things. And my mom was on the other side. She was the very calm one, but very nurturing and caring and compassionate. So, I had a good mix of both of them as role models throughout my life. Yeah, so that was a lot of what it was like. And I remember one time, in 1967—I think it was called that long hot summer—there were actually riots, or civil unrest in our city in Plainfield and my father had taken us away. We were on a little vacation, we came back and we saw tanks and armored tanks and the National Guard patrolling our streets and fires and all kinds of things. So, that had a lot of impact on me as a kid, and probably helped shape some of how I think about social justice, diversity, inclusion, and equity.

JK: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

DH: I just believe everybody should have an opportunity and access, and that we live in a society that is set up to exclude some people and give other people greater opportunities. And our job in education is to kind of level the playing field. And the playing field is never even. And the hardest part about trying to do equity kinds of work in the academy is, we are institutionalized to be part of a system that has been set up to oppress certain people and exclude certain people. So, once you become part of the system, you also become part of that. And sometimes don't even really know that you're participating in that process. So, it takes other people from the outside as well as you constantly having a level of cultural humility, so that you can constantly listen to others and let them tell you about the impact of a decision or a practice or a policy on them. And then our job is to be responsive, and make the changes that are necessary. It's a constant educational process. It's lifetime work. It is never achieved. Because once you think you've got to a certain point, there's another thing that comes up, as it should be. And you know, it is really work that we have to do forever. It will not be changed in my lifetime. There are changes being made, but it will not be eradicated. Let me say that.

JK: We'll come back [to that]. I want to hear you speak more about some DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) work. But going back to your childhood, what were your early experiences with education? So I know there was this historic moment that really shaped your perspective on the world but in terms of education, what were your early experiences?

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DH: Well, actually, I loved school. I remember being excited about going to school. Everybody else was like, "Oh, we have to leave?" I'm like, "Okay, let's go!" I enjoyed it. I liked the social part of school. I liked the learning part of school. I was an avid reader from the very beginning. So, that got me engaged. So, I liked the social sciences. I love the history. I loved anything where I could kind of engage with other people in a conversation. So, that was always exciting to me. Math and science, I kind of tolerated. But that was not my passion, let's just say. But I was involved in school, always, whether if there was an opportunity to, you know, do something extra in the class, whether it be to assist the teacher, you know, to plan a trip. Any of those kinds of things, I was involved in. And I guess that's really where I got my start in terms of my profession, but I didn't really think about it like that until just now (laughs).

JK: Did you grow up expecting to go to college? And what were your professional goals? Which maybe it sounds like you might have been working on those even before you go to college?

DH: I'm telling you, I remember, one time my mom and dad came to visit me here at the Student Union. So, the staff had kind of gathered around because they were like, "Oh, let me see Debra's parents." And my dad started telling this story about how I was in kindergarten and I was in this little competition. It wasn't a competition, it was like a dance recital. But instead of dancing, I was directing the other children and telling them where to stand and how to move. And so he said, from the very beginning, he knew that leadership was in my (laughs), in my vision. That was very clear. Everybody had to go to college. All four of us had to go to college. My mom and dad's rules were that you had to go for at least a semester. So, all three of the girls finished. One sister's an engineer, one sister's a nurse, and I'm in education. My brother went for a semester, he said that was not his thing. And he went into the military. So, he ended up going into the Air Force. And he ended up being an air traffic controller. So, everybody had a strong basis in education, whether it was military, or from a formal education. So, we always knew that we had to go to college. That was not a question.

JK: And did you have some idea or expectations about what you would do before or in your early experiences in college?

DH: To be honest, I loved Perry Mason as a kid. I read every Perry Mason book I could find, and then I watched it on television. So, I thought I was going to be a lawyer until I got to college. And then I started taking constitutional law courses and then I'm like, But what do you mean, you have to lie for your client, if your client is guilty? That didn't reconcile

with my values. So, that was kind of hard for me. So, I didn't really know what I was going to do. And I think the beauty of college and why I don't think people should declare a major as soon as they get here is that we should have the opportunity to explore different things. So, I really kind of started exploring and I ended up being a sociology major. I had a criminal justice minor. I actually worked in a volunteer program called Scared Straight in Rahway State Prison for a semester. That was not for me. So, I think college teaches you what you like, but also teaches us what you don't like. And I think there's value in all of that and trying to decide where you're going to actually be involved.

JK: And how were your experiences as an undergraduate in general?

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DH: Oh, I loved college. I was excited about it. I was a resident advisor. We call them Preceptors at that time. I was in Ramblin' Rose, which is a concert board. I was on the fee advisory board. I worked in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, which was the Black student center on our campus. I was in the students' African American Society, which is similar to our Black Student Union out here. I was involved in lots of different activities related to racism and lack of inclusion. I was an activist. So, that was a part of who I was. And I think it was also that co-curricular involvement, organizing the events and activities—all of those things—that really prompted me to go into education. And I had always said, I didn't want to teach. Because I don't even know why I said I didn't want to teach. But that was something I had in my head. And then I had the opportunity to do the activities—I didn't know that this was a career. That you could do this, plan events and activities and work with students and mentor them and help develop them. I didn't know that there was student development theories, about how people develop, and all of those things. So, that became really exciting to me. And then I also met my best friend on the very first day of school. And I had gone to Rutgers, and we lived in a lounge because they had overbooked and all freshmen had to live on campus. So, I'm like, Oh, my gosh, this is like a disaster. And I was looking around for somebody who looked like me. Because my campus environment—my high school environment was predominantly Black. And then I moved into Rutgers that was predominantly white. So, I was looking for someone who looked like me. And, you know, I saw her, and I was like, Oh, my God, let me talk to her. And we became best friends from that day forward. And it's 45 years later, and we're still friends, and so that was important to me too—all of those—it was it was a great experience. I loved college, high school as well (laughs).

JK: Right, so did that—what sounds like a very positive experience—lead you to pursue the career that you did? Because your first, like, sort of permanent professional position was also with Rutgers, right?

DH: Absolutely. So, I started in a half time position as assistant to the dean for minority affairs. So, it was half time doing social programming and halftime doing academic advising. So, I kind of lived on both sides of the house, the Academic Affairs side and the Student Affairs side. And it was a relatively easy transition for me because I was a student and then I became a professional. But because of the protests that we had been involved in, I think the students saw me with a high degree of trust. And then the administration actually hired me. So, at first there were some people like, "Is she co-opted now that she's part of that administration?" You know? But I think that was an important lesson in trying to make sure that you're listening to both sides. And I really believe in paradoxical leadership; being able to hold two things that look different, simultaneously. So, I think that was probably my training ground for doing that. Yeah, and I loved working at Cooke college. That was the AG (Agriculture) school of Rutgers. So, that was a little different with cows and barns and all kinds of things, but, you know, another learning experience. So, it was great.

JK: And let's step back to your undergraduate experience. And I'll have you talk a little bit about the activism that you were doing. What kinds of things were you organizing students around? What kind of advocacy? Or what sorts of things were you advocating for or were demanding?

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DH: Okay, at that time, we were really demanding, number one, that we had, primarily, that we had more African American faculty and staff, and then students. Because I think it was really important, even back then, we recognized how important role models were to our development. And we didn't have a lot of them at Rutgers. When I came to Rutgers, let me see, it was the—because Rutgers did not allow women to go to Rutgers until 1972. So, I entered in '75. So, it was just three years into being coed. So, there were issues related to racism. There were issues related to sexism. And we were part of a number of groups, primarily African American groups, that were advocating for less racism, of course, more inclusion, more equity, although we didn't use those words at that particular time. And, you know, really trying to make sure that we had sufficient scholarships for people. That we advocated for more funding for the EOP (Educational Opportunity Program) program. You know, the student/faculty/staff ratio between students [and] faculty members of color was really important to us. And then just mentoring in general. And then just people being acknowledging that racism exists, and

our job and responsibility is to unlearn some things that we've learned. And you can only do that through conversation and education, changing policy, those kinds of things, we worked closely with faculty, and staff at that time, who were advocating for us and with us, and helped us really kind of, you know, determine a direction. We had protests at basketball games and all kinds of things, until we finally came up with a list of demands, and then was able to sit down with the administration and work through some of those things. And, frankly, we did not make a lot of progress as much as we would have liked to. I think you come to a kind of stumbling blocks where you can only go so far. And there's a change in administration and things change. And then the things you had worked so hard for, you kind of go back to square one. And you have to start over. And then you graduate. So, that was important to me. So, I think the position, assistant dean for minority affairs really helped me kind of look at those issues, and what kind of support services we were providing for students so that they can be successful.

I was one of those students who sat in a classroom and a faculty member said look to your right, and then look to your left, one of you won't be here at the end of the semester. I'm like, how affirming is that, that doesn't validate anybody. You know, you don't feel like you belong. And I think more so than anything we were looking at those kinds of practices, and people felt that they had the right to say that to other folks. And that was just bothersome. And I felt like I just couldn't just stand around and not say anything, you know. And that's where my activism came from. I think my activism also came from my grandfather, my mom's dad, who was very pro Black, and why those things were important, but always working across the aisles to try to make change and those kinds of things. So, I think all of that together was important in helping shape, kind of, how I felt about those things.

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JK: Yeah, absolutely. So, how long were you with Cook College. And then what brings you to—

DH: —to California?

JK: —to Southern California?

DH: I was with Cook College for seven and a half years or so. And I think, at that time in education, we were told that if you work at any institution for more than ten years, people think you can't work anywhere else. So, at that seven-year mark, I started looking. You know, some things had changed on the campus. There were some incidents that had occurred, that I was not thrilled about where a certain higher-ranking

person had made a decision that was contrary to the decision or the policy in terms of what we said we were going to do. And it was in residence life. We had said, "We're not going to move people. We're going to allow people to work together and learn to live together." And he caved into pressure. And I couldn't make him see differently. And I just recognized a pattern over time. And I'm like, This is probably not where I need to be right now. So, I wanted to start exploring. So, I knew I wanted to go somewhere near a city and I didn't really expect to go to California. But I came out here and I'm like, Ooh, this is pretty nice (laughs). And honestly, I didn't get the job. A friend of mine got the job before me. But he was going through a divorce. And he decided he did not want to leave that area. And so I was the next person in line. So, they offered it to me and I took it. I was young. And I was—I always figured it doesn't really matter how you get in the door, it matters what you do once you get there. So, I tell that story, sometimes, for people to understand, don't let the choice be your stopping block. And that you can continue to move forward. So, that's how I ended up at Cal State Los Angeles. And, yeah, yeah.

JK: How was your experience there both in terms of running the student union there, and then also pursuing a graduate degree?

DH: Yeah, I enjoyed my time as the director of the student union there. That was the first opportunity- I had been introduced to this new nonprofit model of student unions as being auxiliaries and actually separate nonprofit organizations that are governed by students. So, my boss was a student. I also had a university boss as well. So, I had a new boss every year. So, that taught me resiliency, and patience. So, at the same time somebody is evaluating me, I'm also teaching and training that person in leadership and corporate management and all those things, and then being responsive to the university side, particularly in the management of the budget and those things. So, it was a great learning ground, it really made me ramp up my skills pretty quickly. And then, that's when I decided to go back to school. I had started a program in New Jersey, at what was called then Trenton State, which is now the College of New Jersey, in counseling and was not thrilled about the program itself. And I said, "Do I have the capacity? Do I have the willingness, the interest to be a counselor full time?" And I think what I determined is, I like some of the aspects of counseling, but I really liked the administration. So, when I came to Cal State LA, first of all, I could not believe how incredibly affordable college was in California compared to what it was in New Jersey. It took me 10 years to pay off my loans from Rutgers. But here I could afford to actually pay as I was going, and I was like, This is a miracle. I said, "I have to go!" So I actually started a program in educational administration with a finance option. And it was really focused for principals on K through 12. But I just talked to each professor and asked them, could I do my work on higher ed, and they agreed to that. So, I love the flexibility

of the program, allowing you to kind of pursue your interests within it, and applying that. So, that is really what I like. And Cal State LA, and [the] Cal State system in general, is just mission driven. Their mission is to serve. And it has a kind of more student-centric focus than some of the research institutions and things like that. So, those are the things that kind of kept me involved in the system and really interested in continuing to do the work that I was doing.

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JK: And then what brings you to Cal State Northridge?

DH: Well, I actually, I'm the person who—or this is what I thought, anyway, because your mind does change over time—so I worked at Rutgers for seven and a half years. I worked at Cal State LA for six years. And then I thought it was time to move. I am a person who likes to come in and kind of fix things. And then I said, "It's probably time for me to go somewhere else." So, I started looking around. A couple of people that I know, worked here and actually told me the position was open—encouraged me to apply. I competed against five males, that I knew through my professional association. And I got the job. I had also applied at Ohio State, and was offered that position as well. And was kind of deciding because I thought I wanted to go back home. So, I was like, Ohio is closer to New Jersey so I can go there. But something about Northridge kind of pulled me in. And I think it really was their emphasis on the importance of students and students' voices. And their ability to evolve based on need. So, I felt like that was the place I wanted to go. Even though I thought the system of these nonprofit corporations with student voice was hard to learn initially, I think I grew to love that aspect of it, because I think it kept us closer to the needs of students and what they wanted and what their desires were. So, I think that's what really attracted me to Northridge and to the CSU. And Northridge had a good reputation in our professional association. It was larger. It was more comprehensive. And the other thing was Blenda Wilson was an African American woman and she was president. So, I'm like, Who doesn't want an opportunity, as a Black woman, to work for a Black woman president? So all of those things combined, I think, were the catalysts that helped me make a decision about coming to Northridge.

JK: And what were your early years like? So you're going on—this is year thirty, right? What were those early years like?

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DH: So, early years in the—number one, I just had to understand the campus culture because each campus is so incredibly different. So, just because I worked at Cal State LA, that

does not translate to Cal State Northridge. So, I tried to figure that out as much as possible. And then the other piece is establishing a rapport with our student empowered board. Because our board was very non-trusting. So, you know, Why are you here? What are you doing? And then setting up, what I would call, some infrastructure kinds of things, some philosophical groundings for the organization: one being servant leadership. And it's a concept that we introduced early on, because I wanted people to understand our job, first, is to serve. And then we can teach and train and then we lead. But I wanted it to be throughout the entire organization. So, we had to really kind of make some changes in the organization. We had to also establish new traditions in terms of programming, we didn't have a lot of traditions, or the ones that we had were not really working well anymore, because the students are starting to change. So, we had to be responsive to that. So, some of the things I concentrated on were hiring like critical staff; key people who I knew could move the organization forward, while I concentrated on other things like our operations area. Jason Wang, who is now the senior director of Physical Plant Management for Northridge was one of my key hires initially, because I—he had the operations experience. He wants to focus on the building and what the building should look and feel like, for students. That was really important to me. And it became more important when you think about—and it goes back to my dad, I think—that focus on quality. We have students from a variety of backgrounds, they all deserve quality. Our job is to give that to them. And that's should be the expectation. That should not be the exception. So, I wanted to kind of get some key people in place that would really help move the organization differently.

And then we tried to be a good campus partner, you know? If other people needed us, what could we contribute? And I wanted—I think one of my initial conversations—I'd met with everybody on the staff had like an hour meeting and just had a series of questions just trying to get to know people. What were their pet peeves? If they had a magic wand, what would they change? All of those kinds of things. And one of the things that I think came out of my meetings is that most people just thought they were doing a job. They didn't think of it as a career. And they did not see themselves as educators outside the classroom. So, I wanted to kind of change that focus and have them really think about, No, we're educators. We may do it in different spaces, we may use different modalities, we may use different ways of getting at that. But we are also educators. And by employing students and having students serve on our board of directors, they can really learn some key leadership skills, and skills that they're going to use in their careers no matter what their career is. So, that, I think—those are the pieces that we started early on to kind of change the focus of what a student union could be. It wasn't just a conference center, or it wasn't just fun and games. It was much deeper than that.

JK: Yeah, I got that sense from reading through sort of the organizational structure and just the sheer number of students you have involved as employees and in overseeing operations that the USU is—it's not facilities driven. It's mission driven. And that mission is developing students.

DH: Absolutely. Thank you for that.

JK: So I thought that gives really a wonderful sense of your vision for the student union and you know, for your role and the role of students in it. So, I may have missed some, I have about five big initiatives that I know you've led as part of the USU and so I was hoping that you could talk about sort of the origin stories for those initiatives, your experience in seeing them through to completion and then also if I missed some. So, I'm going to name five, but if there are additional ones you'd like to talk about, feel free. So, the ones that came to mind are the Student Recreation Center, the Pride Center, the Veterans Resource Center, and the Oasis Wellness Center, the Dream Center. I guess we could also add to that, kind of the big project you are in the midst of right now.

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DH: Okay, yeah, that's it, in terms of what I would call major facility related projects. Because for me, the facility is not the driver. It's what the facility provides. So, there are some other things I think that I have started and that are just really important to me personally, but I think, represent what a college union should be all about. And college unions—one of the things about a college union in general, is that we are supposed to be responsive to the students out of classroom experience, whatever their needs are, and that sometimes we have to change to meet their needs more specifically. So, thinking about the student recreation center—we had, you know, done the smaller renovation of the USU—in fact, when I first got here, we were in the middle of a renovation project, a construction project, at that time. And then we had the earthquake, so some things change. So, after that, we knew that the campus needed, also, to grow differently. Because there were—we had a small 6000 square foot fitness center in our building that was actually operated by the Associated Students—student government. And they approached us about working on this project jointly. And we looked at it, we said, "This would be interesting. Let's see what we can do." Then we discovered that Associated Students couldn't really bond a building financially—that the student union would have to do that. So, then it became our project to do. And then we work collaboratively with the Associated Students and students from both areas. They had more of the expertise and experience working in recreation, where we had more of the expertise and facilities management, and financing. So, together, we kind of came up with a vision. And I think the important thing is all of our—most of our major projects are, require a student

referendum. So, students had to actually had to vote to approve taxing themselves increasing their students fee to actually do this project. So, we hired an outside firm, Brailsford & Dunlavey, who we still use to this day. They are a facilities planning firm. And [we] work with them on a variety of focus groups and surveys. And then we did more focus groups to try to see what students needed, wanted, what they were willing to pay for that, all of those kinds of things. And that really helped shape the vision for the Student Recreation Center.

And one of the things I also thought about is taking students—and not just the students, but the students and some staff and architects—on site visits. So, at the end of the year, we would take them to other places that had good reputations, or strong facilities, or a strong program in a specific area. And that's something that we've carried through with each of these projects. And they got to visit these spaces on other campuses. Some of the places were across the country. I think the Rec Center was up and down the north or northwest—this area—and got a chance to see what other people do. Because when you are only on your campus, you only see what you have. You don't necessarily see what other people have and what they offer and once people's eyes are open, then they become the champions of the project. It's not just me out there saying, "Ooh, this is a great idea." So that's really how that project developed. We were able to successfully pass the referendum. We developed the financial plan, where we would implement the fee over a course of like five years, we even gave alumni members, people who had graduated, several years of the ability to come back and use the facility for several years, because they were voting on it, but they weren't going to get a chance to experience it. So, yeah, it takes a while it's a long-haul process, it takes probably six, seven years to actually get the project. The referendum, to hire the contractor, the architect, design, build, construction, and then open. So, we actually opened that facility in 2012, we came up with a model that AS would do certain pieces, outdoor adventures, sports club, and the rock wall, and the climbing wall. And we would do fitness and wellness and exercise like aquatics, intramural [sports], artificial turf field facility, personal training, boxing, those kinds of things. So, we kind of split responsibilities and there's a student committee for each of the projects that I've worked on. And I think one of the things that's been really important is when we develop these, we create a project statement, of like a vision. What is it that we want this facility to do for the campus? And that became kind of the driver, so if we felt like we were venturing off course, that became our course corrector. This is what we said we were envisioning. Does this meet that criteria? And then we also developed—and this is the financial plan to actually support it. And a lot of people do a financial plan to support the construction, but they don't think about the operation. And to me, that's just as important. Because if you build a lovely building, and you don't have the funding or the staffing to operate it, then it's just going to be a lovely building. So, we had to have a program that was going to

support what we wanted. So, we did that as well. And we did a lot of planning and things like that related to it. And so I really can't stress enough the financial aspect of planning and what—because something's always going to come up—and contingencies and that kind of thing.

So the center opened in 2012. And last year we celebrated our 10th anniversary. So, we were excited about that. And we had several 10th anniversaries this last year, because the Pride Center, opened in 2012, as well as the Veterans Resource Center. And those two efforts really came from student activism. We had groups of students who were LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender, and inclusive of identities not articulated.) students, and students who were veterans and both. You know, the veterans were coming back from Iraq, and Afghanistan and needing services. Because we, you know, we had veteran services long time ago, and then there were no wars so that there was no real need for that. But now we're having an influx of people coming back. So, there was a need for these services. And then, of course, our LGBTQIA+ students, there was always an estimate that was roughly 10% of the population that was LGBTQIA+. So, these students also are like, "There are things we need that we're not receiving from the institution. We want to create a space where we feel like we belong so that we can be comfortable so that we can succeed." So they started petitioning, and the student union board actually approved them coming into the space, but them operating their own program. And we have a unique structure that if we don't operate the program, if somebody else uses it, we have to charge them space rental. So, that was something that we gave them an opportunity to do for the vets and for the Pride Center. And it didn't materialize. They were not able to sustain enough funding to do it. So, we kind of looked at our mission, as like, "These two things are aligned with our mission. Is this something that we should take on as the University Student Union?" And that's really how it happened. So, students said, "Yes, yes, this is a line. Yes, we should do this. Come up with a financial plan." We hired some staff member who had actually graduated from the educational psychology and counseling department who I taught, and said, "Help us develop this." And we had a group of interested students in both areas that really, kind of, helped us focus on what the centers should be. They had to compromise. One person got a smaller space, and one person got a larger space, because we only had so much space in the facility. But they were able to actually develop, and now they've moved twice since they started because they've grown and the staffing has grown. All of those things have been really important in that process.

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The Oasis Wellness Center came out of a different kind of process. On the campus, we participate in the American College Health Association assessment every two years. And you know, Dr. Chassiakos, who was the head of the Klotz Student Health Center was presenting the information to our Student Affairs directors. And one of the things that she noted is, the two of the major impacts that were having negative consequences for students in terms of their academics, was their inability to manage their stress and their lack of sleep. So, we're like, "Oh, maybe that's something that we can work on." So the Health Center Director, myself and the Dean of the College of Health and Human Development, Sylvia Alva, who is now going to be the interim president, I think, at Fullerton, worked on a position paper to tell, and kind of create a vision for what that was going to be. Obviously, students were involved in it, because we had focus groups, we did surveys with the clubs and organizations, with our board of directors, with our student employees, and also talked about what you perhaps weren't getting from the Student Recreation Center. So, you know, wellness comes in all capacities, and you don't necessarily have to go work out in the gym. There are other ways to get there. So, we wanted to create something different. We also took them on site visits for this. And when we did, what we found was we found rooms in student unions, or in rec centers, that had some beanbags on the floor, and some pamphlets on the wall. And we're like, "No, this is not the vision that we're trying to create." So we wanted to create something bigger and better.

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So we also took them on visits to some spas. We actually went to Burke Williams in Santa Monica. But they started to see what was possible, what the vision was possible. So, then we sat in rooms and we met with our architects and one of the architects called this the design bridge. Like, what is going to be the bridge between the Rec Center and the Wellness Center? Where the Rec Center's loud, the Wellness Center is going to be quiet. Where the Rec Center uses technology, we use very little technology in the oasis. So, we came up with all of these different bridges that we wanted to see and, again, created the concept document, and a project statement that kind of drove us. And we were able to create—and this one, we had enough financing, it was probably about a \$6 million project, by the end—enough reserves in the student union, so that we didn't have to ask the students to support that. We had enough funding to do that. And then we partnered with the health center for certain things and with the faculty members, because they were all part of that. So, those staffs also went on the site visits with us. So, it was a very collaborative effort. And I think one of the things why it was so successful is we were able to collaborate on the faculty side and on the Student Affairs side to make this a reality.

And then we tried to focus on wellness, you know? And at that time, there was a lot of articles coming out in the newspaper about schools spending money frivolously on "amenities", as they call them. So, we tried to make sure that we were focused on [pauses] not to use the word "spa", but to use the word "wellness", and "well-being". And how that would impact student's abilities. One of the other partnerships now we've developed is—and we had this idea from the very beginning—is we worked with Institutional Research. And we asked them if they could do a study of the users of the Oasis. So, they conducted the study over a period of time. And they had a group of users and non-users that had similar characteristics. And what they found out is that the people who use the Oasis had higher GPAs, and were less likely to be on academic probation. So, that came full circle for why we created it in the first place is to manage your sleep, and to manage your stress better, so that you can perform better academically. So, that's always our premise behind everything that we're doing.

You know, the Dream Center came about a little bit differently. That was not our project. It really was operated—it was a university project—started as the Dream Project, actually. It wasn't even a center at first. And then it was operated finally by EOP (Educational Opportunity Program). And then we in the USU, granted them a space to be in the facility. But again, our board said, "Hey, this might be a good fit for us." And I think our students are very supportive about taking on university responsibilities that they think are aligned with what the USU is supposed to do. And then it becomes a student driven responsibility. So, that's basically what we did with EOP. We work with them and they decided that, yes, this does make sense. And campus quality fees actually helped support that and continue to help support that operation. So, we actually managed that responsibility for the university at this point.

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Yeah, and I think the other thing, that's probably one of the most important things for me is our student employment program. And that's not a facility, but it's one of those things that supports the facility. We are the largest employer of students on campus. And that's important to us, but we want to make sure the experience that they're getting is actually impacting their leadership development, their careers after here. So, we do a survey every year. This is self-reported for the students and ask them how their work experience has impacted that. Throughout the course of the year we do training and development with the students. We have two huge student summit programs where they get leadership development and DEI work, other kinds of experiences that are going to be helpful to them throughout their career at CSUN, but also afterwards. IR (Institutional Research) is actually doing a study of that right now. And those results will be released, I think, next month. We had a preliminary discussion in, I think it was

October or November, and now we're excited about these results, because I think it's going to prove, again, that students who—because student employment is a high impact practice. It really positively impacts the students that—they need to work, but they need to not work too much, you know (laughs)? Twenty hours or less! And they need to also get mentored by their supervisors. They need training and development. They need performance appraisals. They need to do self appraisals. They need opportunities to grow and have higher levels of responsibility. We have this great article, it talks about emanation and generation. And we talk about when a student first comes on to us, we are giving them the answers. And that's perfectly appropriate. At the end, we want them to be asking the questions. It's a change in philosophy of how we want to move them along the process. We want, you know, at the beginning, we're providing the leadership. Then at the end, they're developing their leadership. At the beginning, even we're taking care of students. And at the end, the generation side, we're caring about students, which is just a difference in philosophy. And we kind of explain to students what we're doing, and why we're doing that. So, what I would say is I would put our students against any students in the world, in terms of working because they have an understanding of what it really means to work, why they're doing it, the importance of their own—taking responsibility for their own development, all of those things. So, you know, we want to develop their capacities as much as we can.

So I would probably say the Student Employment Program, and now the major project—we're not quite doing it as we thought we were going to do. COVID has greatly impacted that project, and inflation and all the things that are attached to that has greatly increased the prices. And the construction industry is a little difficult right now. In addition to that, we've had a decline in enrollment in CSUN. And also the interest rate for borrowing money has also increased. So, it was kind of like that this perfect storm of circumstances. So, our board made a decision that we would not move forward with that particular project at the end of last year, and now we are doing a couple of other things.

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The most exciting thing that we're working on right now is the basic needs suite. And we want to turn the pub and a couple of spaces that are adjacent to that into a basic needs suite. This would house the food pantry that's currently in Laurel Hall, it would house Matty's Closet, which is the Career Center program for providing clothing for students who are going on internships and interviews. We are also housing our basic needs. Our care coordinators, we have staff who assist students who are facing homelessness, food insecurity, all of those kinds of things. And they also provide wraparound services to make sure students are there and [are] still in school. "What else can we be helping with? Do you need counseling? Do you need a referral? Do you need MataCare,

funding?" Whatever it is that they need. And the last piece would be a community kitchen. So, we're again working with faculty members from the College of Health and Human Development. And there's a couple of Healthy Living programs that they worked with, and CalFresh—all of those things are going to come together. So, in the community kitchen we will be able to have food demonstrations using food from the food pantry, hot water dispensers, microwaves, cold food storage lockers, so they can store their food. All those kinds of things that are important to help support a student so they can get through here. I think what we want to do—and I think what's most important about this project is we want to normalize the provision of basic needs on campus, because it is probably one of the fastest growing populations for food and housing insecurity in the nation—and, you know, 18 to 24 year olds. So, that's hard to hear. So, we have a responsibility to do something to do that. But we also want to take it out of the shadows, because they're in all these different places all over the campus. So, they're valuable, but they could be even more valuable if they're integrated and colocated. They work together. And it normalizes it, by just saying, "Oh, this is another service that's in the student union." It's right on Main Street. And there's a lounge space integrated out throughout here. All of those things that every student could use. So, I think that's really important to us. And so that's, that's the exciting project that I'm working on right now.

JK: That's a lot. I really like that final one that you talked about. I think it's so important, because if you're talking about normalizing it, but also, you know, bringing it out of the shadows and not making it something that happens over here, and nobody, you know, we don't talk about it, but it's right here. And trying to take the stigma away from it. And, yeah.

DH: Yes. That was the other word I was looking for—Stigmatize! Destigmatize that whole process. Absolutely.

JK: I think, this is somewhat related, and something that you spoke about earlier in our conversation, but you gave a really comprehensive vision for your perspective on diversity, equity, and inclusion work. And I was wondering if you could talk about how you put that vision to work at CSUN, sort of in more concrete ways? Like, how have you translated that bigger vision into the projects that you do at CSUN?

DH: Oh, man, that's a that's a great question! So in lots of ways—I think the first thing is I actually wrote a—well, I adapted a statement. Let me be absolutely honest. A friend of mine, who was in Student Affairs wrote a vision for a multicultural organization a number of years ago. So, I've kind of taken pieces that he did. And I also developed my own pieces. And it's kind of my guiding principle about how we infuse diversity,

inclusion, and equity in all of the work that we do and how we can make our organizations more DEI responsive—inclusive excellence. What that looks like and feels like. But it starts with exposure. I think, you know, that we have started to bring in speakers and training and development for our staff. And some of it has not been easy. And some of it we've had some missteps, where people said, "This is what you thought you were giving us? Let me tell you how this landed for us." And so you have to be, again, be willing to sit down with students and hear their feedback—or staff because some of our younger staff have very strong opinions about those things as well. There's lots of generational differences about how people approach work. So, that has been a great learning for all of us. And you know, that's why we changed our mission statement a couple of years ago for the University Student Union to focus on that equity. We created a Diversity and Inclusion Department within the student union that currently has, well, it will have three staff members in it and a student assistant. But we've [tried] in each department—this is something that the Vice President for Student Affairs actually initiated as well—Dr. Watkins—is that each entity in Student Affairs has to have a DEI focus goal. So, that's something that we started doing last year.

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And then this year—last year as well—all of our departments, and there's probably about 26, or 27 departments in the USU—all of them also have a DEI goal. And one of the ones that we're working on now is for the SRC (Student Recreation Center) is something that was brought up at a meeting. I served on the Commission [on] Diversity and Inclusion, and one of our faculty members brought up the issue that students with disabilities don't have access to a lot of the equipment that is in the Student Recreation Center. So, we took that to heart and we are working on a project now where we are getting, kind of, QR codes that we're going to put on the machines that shows people how to use them differently for the differently-abled population. But it's all because we listen, you know? Because we don't always know. And, you know, you start out and you think that you're being inclusive, but there are populations that you're not serving. Since we have the Dream Center and the Pride Center and the Vet Center, you know, they're also always telling us, and kind of leading the way in various efforts. There's lots of efforts on campus now. Because the LGBTQIA+ Advisory Committee, and through Sarina Loeb and another faculty member had actually held focus groups for students who are trans and non-binary last year. And they came up with a number of issues that were impacting them. And our job is to be responsive to those and make those changes. We have a policy that says that students have a preferred name. So, they can choose whatever that name is. But we also have a lot of different technology systems on the campus that don't necessarily talk to each other. So, even if you change your preferred name in one place, it does not necessarily get to all these other places. So, we've had

to kind of work on those. You know, making changes about the number of gender inclusive restrooms on campus are some specific things.

A project that we're working on now with the Vice President for Student Affairs office, as well, is creating experiences for undocumented students that help them have quote, unquote, "work-like experiences." A lot of them can't work unless they have [social security numbers.] And right now, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is not taking on any new individuals so we have to create experiences that students can have and then they can be paid through scholarship. So, we're working on that with a couple of people on campus and student affairs is really leading that work. My supervisor the Interim Vice President for Student Affairs, Equity and Inclusion, Dr. Freddie Sanchez, is kind of leading that effort with Daniela (Barcenas) from The Dream Center. So, our job is to try to figure out where are the pressure points that students are feeling. And then how can we alleviate those. And I think it's really important that we have this roadmap process that we talk about equity, diversity, and inclusion as concepts but we have to go beyond that. We're also at the Black Student Success Council (BSSC), which I co-chair, we are working on a project to bring in a consultant that will actually help us develop a strategic plan for Black student success on this campus. We have equity gaps that exists for various student groups, including Black students. And that should not be. So, what can we do differently than what we're currently doing to address those needs? And we need a comprehensive, integrated, intentional approach. Because we have lots of good programs on this campus, and lots of people are doing things in pockets.

[01:16:18]

DH: A program we used to run was called Wisdom. It was for a mentoring program for African American women that was really started by Paulette, Dr. Paulette Theresa-Schechtel in University Counseling Services. She said, "Well, I have this idea." And I was like, "Okay, well, let's talk about it." And we started this thing together, and run [it together]. But now we're looking at the identity based cultural center projects that are existent— [and] are coming to fruition, and having the Black House serve as the first pilot of what those projects should be like. So, it made more sense for us to shift our focus in terms of giving those dollars that came from Campus Quality Fee to the Black House, and let that person work from there so that there's some more support over [there], at least two full-time staff people and six or seven students. So, we can't be territorial about what we do, we have to figure out what is the best mechanism for making these processes work. And what's absolutely critical is the infrastructure, we must make sure we have proper staffing to carry these things out. Because people are tired, you know? There is a cultural taxation that comes with doing this work. And we have to make sure we have enough people, enough resources. I mean, we're never going to have everything we

need. But we certainly can structure it in ways that we set people up for success, instead of setting them up for failure.

So those are some of the ways in which we do it. We have frank, brutal sometimes, conversations at our management team about what that looks like, and that they have to be uncomfortable. And I have to say, I can't always be the one talking about DEI. White folks need to do that, too. You know, it has to come from everyone. And you can't do that unless you get more comfortable. You know enough about your own culture. So, you're comfortable with that. And then you start exploring others and you ask questions, but you don't expect everybody else to educate you. You need to do your own work. So, I think all of those things have, kind of, created opportunities. I love to serve, as I said, as the co-chair for the Black Student Success Council. And, you know, this initiative about Black students came out of a meeting where we were kind of fed up, you know? We see the numbers for Black students dwindling, and every piece of research that we've seen, doesn't even suggest, it says that if there are not sufficient role models on campuses that could validate students, look like them, support them, mentor them, they are not going to be as successful. This is the same stuff I was talking about when I was at Rutgers back in the 70s. So, it's still here, and we need to develop a plan. And then for me what's really important is actually develop a plan, give it time to work, give it the resources, it needs to support it, and then assess it. And continue to assess it every year, make some valid conclusions based on what you see, and then tweak the program to make it more—and if that's not working, then you need to try something else.

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So those are some of the things that I think of when I think of some of the work that I've done in this DEI space: the USU mission statement; we have programming. And some of these things I didn't do. It was just through my organization, or [that] other people suggested. But I really have tried to champion these issues. You know, one of the things out of the George Floyd murders, we created these healing circles. And that was in partnership with the University Counseling Services and the USU. So, particularly during COVID—that they could be on Zoom. And people could come in and express what they needed to express, you know, talk about some things. All of that stuff shows students that we are supporting them, and we recognize them where they are. We're doing a healing circle—I think it's next week—for Ukraine. And you know, it's been a year since this started. It's like, our job is to be more inclusive, always. This is lifetime work, as I said, and you have to integrate it into all parts of the organization. We, even in our business department, it's like, Well, how do you do it there? Well, our Associate Director is working on a policy about procurement. How do we go out and search for

vendors who are not the typical vendor? How do you do that? And how do you do that in an equitable fashion? Because there's a difference between being equal, and equity. And our emphasis has always been on equity, and educating people about what that means. And then recognizing that we have to talk about the things that are difficult. And sometimes you do things consciously. And sometimes you do things unconsciously. But it has an impact on people. And people [are] like, "Well, I didn't mean that!" Well, intent does not equal impact. So, we have to figure out what the impact was, and then how can we educate you, or put a policy in place or a training or development that's consistent and sustainable—so that we continue to—when new people come into the system, they learn our system and our appreciation for DEI, and what that actually means. And it's much greater, it's much deeper than a surface level. And it's going to take years to get there. But we're in for the long haul. So, that's what I think.

JK: I want to be mindful of your time. It's 3:30. So, I think we've touched on a lot of the questions that I had remaining in our conversation, maybe with the exception of thinking about or hearing from you about the COVID 19 pandemic and how it impacted both students and then your work. And I think this is also related to these questions of equity that you—and issues of equity that you've brought up, because I think what was thrown into stark relief, during the pandemic was, you know—How do I put this? (Pauses) Issues of equity were—or lack of equity were deepened by the pandemic, and I'm sure that you saw that in your work with students. And so I was wondering if you could talk about that.

[01:24:24]

DH: Absolutely. Um, COVID 19 laid bare things that were under the surface that some people knew about, and others pretended they didn't know about, and then others really just did not know about. But it, you know, things that were difficult before just became more difficult. Things that were inequitable before, that was heightened. So, number one, we had to move from being a brick-and-mortar kind of operation to, How can we provide some of these same levels of services to students online? So our staff had to pivot and that pivot word pretty doggone quickly, and learn how to use Zoom. They became experts at social media and did, you know, a lot of Instagram Lives and Facebook Lives and all of those kinds of things. They used Discord, you know, to talk to each other, and use Teams now that we never used to use before. But we just said, "Okay, what is it that we can give the students?" You know, the Student Recreation Center, all their classes, we ended up doing them virtually. So, we had people, you know, teaching from their backyard. Somebody else is videotaping it, or they're doing it on a tripod, and putting the classes up so that people could participate. We also sent, like, FitKits home. Like, we asked the first 1000 students who sign up, you can get a FitKit, like so we

would mail them equipment to their house, so that they could keep up with these particular exercises or whatever. We sent care packages to students. And we identified certain students who are parents, and then various constituency groups and then just, you know, transfer students and freshmen and all the students that we wanted to really kind of educate about who we were with the Student Union, because they've not been here. They've not seen that. So, who are we? Um, the computer lab, [did] you know, students get 20 pages a day for free in our computer lab? So, we're like, "How are we going to provide this service?" So we worked with a couple outside agencies, and one that didn't work well. But then we found Office Depot. So, now we have a program that if you want to make copies in your area, in your hometown, anytime, [wherever] across the nation, you get a card from us, and then you can get your copies [for free].

DH: So we were still trying to figure out different ways to deliver service. Even with the computer lab. We set up a program, I don't remember the name of it off the top of my head, but the computer lab technician can actually come in and kind of take over your computer. So, if you're stuck somewhere, they can help you maneuver and figure out what you need to do. We're still doing classes, but we're doing them virtual, you know? How to use PowerPoint. How to do a Prezi [proprietary presentation application]. All of those kinds of things—how to use Canva [graphic and text design platform]. The other thing I think we did is we recognized that scholarships were really important, particularly to students of various ethnicities, and cultures. And so we created scholarships, and we endowed them so that they will go on in perpetuity. So, if we weren't going to use money for other things, we kind of shifted the focus into things that were more long term and a different direction, we gave out \$250 Bookstore grants to 1000 students. So, the students who were most needy, or had the most need, not most needy, had the most need, were granted those. And we were here in certain areas, like when we the campus first opened a study space on the other side of campus, it was our students that actually staffed that space. And because when we did start to come back, our students and our staff and then other students and staff from across the campus became the navigators, the ambassadors who give out information. But all the center's had virtual appointments, all the resource centers. We continue to do classes through the Oasis, whether it was mindfulness or meditation. Obviously, we couldn't do like massage, things like that, but there were some things that we could do. So, we decided, we identified what they were, we figured out a modality to do it in, and then we continued to deliver. And then, of course, the marketing department had to continue to market everything so that people are just aware. Because they were bombarded by so much information. And then we, you know, our staff learned how to use all of the technology tools to support other departments who were trying to learn how to do those things.

[01:30:35]

DH: And I think, you know, the other thing is mental health challenges became more prevalent, as well. And while we didn't work directly in that area, we certainly recognized the impact on our staff and our student assistants. And one of the things I think we had to learn is to be more compassionate with ourselves and each other. And the staff said, "Okay, now that we're returning, what is the one thing that you want to make sure we continue to do?" And that was, number one, "be understanding." You know, understand—and this is an equity issue—that different people need different things. And then try to meet people where they are. We still get the work done, we proved it during COVID, that we could. So, there's an environment that allows us to be hybrid in certain places. Certain places—it's important for us to be here and be in person—but we can do a combination of things that work. So, I call those Corona dividends. Some things that came out of COVID that we now recognize, are important that we continue. I think those are just kind of some of the examples that I can think of related to that.

JK: I think, related to that, I mean, it's been such a challenging few years, right? It's not been easy. And, you know, learning to try to always practice compassion through all of that is an incredible thing. And so I think maybe I'd like to ask one final question that will leave us hopefully, on a hopeful note, but what are your hopes for the USU moving forward and for CSUN, and its students?

DH: Let's see what would I say? I hope that CSUN continues and actually really lives into its destiny. We are a teaching institution. That's what we should be doing, and we should be doing it well. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't be doing research, because I think those opportunities should be done and with the focus on students doing that, being supported by faculty members; that we embrace our history of activism, and understand what that means in the context of developing a university that operates by the principles of inclusive excellence, and what that actually means; that we continue to close the equity gaps that currently exist for our students, because there are opportunity gaps. And that we're rated one of the top schools in terms of social mobility. As students go here, they increase their opportunities. And we need to make sure that we understand that's for all students, not for some of our students. And if we have gaps in that based on ethnicity, or culture, or anything, then our job is to examine what that is and figure out how to address those needs. I think it's really important that we provide opportunities and access for all of our students. And, the students that go here, they're the workforce of the future, but they also have an opportunity to go back to their communities and they change. CSUN is transformational. It's a transformational campus. Because once you go here, you're changed. And you have an opportunity to bring that back to your communities and your families. And that's why the relationship between the family is so important. It's not just about the student. So, if we can kind of

grow into that, I think we have an opportunity to really change the trajectory of our world. And right now our world kind of needs that, you know (laughs)? So, I think we should just kind of live into our destiny. But I think it's also important that we acknowledge, where we've come from, and where we still have to go.

[01:35:28]

JK: I think I'll have us leave it there.

[End of interview]