

Michele Cooper, Track 2

Tape 1, side B

JB: Now we are back on tape.

MC: Okay. But as I was saying, before the tape ended and we had to flip it over, I went to Dr. Jacobs and I told her, "This is—this is crazy, you know. We have a serious problem here." And then we started comparing the graduation rates of Northridge to other campuses, and we were ranking pretty low, in terms of our graduation rates in comparison to our sister campuses.

JB: Across the board?

MC: Yeah.

JB: All students?

MC: Yeah.

JB: Yeah.

(00:00:35)

MC: And so I said, "Wow," I said—that's when I started to just rethink the whole idea of what educational equity meant to me. And seeing the—the difference between educational opportunity as a program and educational equity on the campus because I had been sitting on the Educational Equity Coordinating Council. And I started to realize—and we talked about it, you know—educational equity has to apply across the board, and it has to apply to all students. Certainly, in educational eq—equity—I mean, educational opportunity program for disadvantage students, students from nontraditional background, is important on a campus. But it's also important that students throughout the campus are being supported and encouraged to achieve at their highest ability level. I mean, to hear students in student leadership saying, "I've got to keep that 2.0 [G.P.A] so I can keep my position." You know, I mean, you got to keep a 2.0, how about trying to keep a 3.5? Or a 3.0 at least, you know. And that's when I said, "You know, we really need to do something about retention," so I said in my campaign that I wanted to see Associated Students do something about retention, and we did, you know. We did. We started we established the Intrusive Retention Academic Support Program, which we call IRAS. And that program was headed by Tom Hoffman. We created a Director of Retention Position, and we included a stipend of \$350 a month for that position. And Tom Hoffman had been a graduate student and also former Graduate Senator on the board. And I asked him would he help us because I knew he had been working with Academic Services as well as the STEP program and LRC [Learning Resource Center] and

a whole bunch of other things. And he was in the Ed [Educational] Psych Department, so he agreed to work with the IRAS program, Webster Moore assisted us in putting together a proposal for the program. And we coordinated with Dr. Kimmerling in the counseling office and with Webster Moore in Academic Services and Dr. Jacobs. And we actually were able to get Webster Moore as an advisor from Academic Services. And I believe Allen Mayor, I believe, is—was the advisor for, the Counseling Center, to support Tom in his efforts and Dr. Kimmerling were so generous that he even offered an internship to Tom so that Tom could use this as an internship toward his program, his Master's program So what happened was we took this proposal and we created a board and we had a representative from each academic school, from the Senate, to sit on this board and basically—ideally, what it was designed to do was have these representatives bring back the problems they were seeing in terms of retention, academic support needs, and different things like that from their various schools and bring it back to the Retention Board and have them address those problems. And the way that the problems would be addressed would be making recommendations to the school's things we think they should be doing to support the students, and also, in the form of workshops that we could provide for students. Some of the workshops that we did put on over the year included 'Undeclared Majors' workshops to help undeclared majors determine what major that they wanted to go into because we'd like to see more students declare a major because students—they wait too long to declare majors. And so we wanted to provide some service there. Some other things that we did were workshops on academic excellence, study skills what were some of the other—time management skills geared toward student leaders and managing their time between work, leadership positions, and their academics. And just a host of other things that we did through the Intrusive Retention Academic Support Board. And I give full credit and pride in Tom Hoffman's efforts in the Retention Board because he gave everything to that board did an excellent job. And I just don't know how they're going to replace him and maintain this board over the next year. It makes me so nervous, and I will periodically follow up and see that someone is placed in that position that can follow through because the—this year was the first year for all of the things Tom accomplished in the first year, not having any prior precedent set on how to carry it, this Board. I was just impressed and these advisors were advisors. They did not set a program for him that he followed; he set a program. He created the program and—and it followed through, so that was one of our commitments. Another one was outreach to the students. We thought that Associated Students having a \$1.4 million budget had a great responsibility—now it's \$1.6—had a great responsibility to reach a larger constituency in terms of service. The Greeks were always addressed. Their needs were always met; as a matter of fact, they're very well represented on Associated Students as an Elective Board. But there're so many students at large that are not reaping the benefits of Associated Students. And I think one of the fears in—in outreach that the association may have had in the past is spreading a small sum and a small service to so many people that spreading it out might thin it out and lessen, really, the impact that the association could have. But I didn't believe that. I believed that there's a way that we can serve the entire campus community with limited funds that we have. Continuing to fund our

club—fund our clubs and organizations but also offering service to the campus community because the way Associated Students had operated, was it was just a Board that allocated funds to clubs and organizations to put on diverse programming. But they really weren't getting into the hardline issues of retention, meaning the service needs of students within the various academic schools. So I was speaking to a guy Tom from Dallas; old Tom, I'll never forget him. He was here for a NACA conference, National Association of Campus Activities. And I met him back in the summer. And we were talking and he told me about these constituency councils that he had over at his university in Dallas. And I said, "Constituency council? Well that's—what do they do?" He says, "Well, we have a council in each of the school and they deal with the needs of each school and then they bring it back to the main board. I thought wow, what an excellent idea to offer service. So you see you're not really spending money. You're not really making any major financial commitment. Of course, you may have to, at some point, if these constituency councils do get off the ground, give a little money to these councils to operate. But basically, the idea of the constituency council is to set up a council where faculty, deans, and students can come together and talk about student needs within the schools. This also can serve to support the school-based programs from academe— educational equity because it can be a resource for them to find out what some of the student needs are. So that was the idea that constituency councils that we attempted to establish over this year. Uh, we didn't have the success of actually having physical constituency councils established within each academic school. I believe that the new administration will continue to try to fulfill that dream maybe in another approach or whatever. But what we did do, Tom with the Retention Board and also Christine with the Academic Affairs Standing Committee, did at least attempt to connect with the deans, and I also sent letters to the deans, advising them that, where I did this in the beginning of my year back in July I believe, asking them to support us in our effort to establish constituency councils within their schools. But we didn't — we weren't able to get the students' support. So what we—what we have to do is encourage student leaders within the clubs and organizations of these academic schools to send representatives to sit on these constituency councils and serve to represent their schools. So those were two key things that I thought were big things to deal with the retention and deal with dem—to deal with outreach.

(00:10:08)

JB: I'm sorry. The problems with the students. With the cons—constituency councils and as the administration and the faculty were willing to participate, the students themselves were an obstacle. Why is that?

MC: You know, they say—they use the word "apathy" to (both laugh) describe students on campus; I don't. I don't think that students are apathetic. I think that students, you know, you—you have to consider where we are in the world today, and this world, we'll only just deal with this nation, is very complex. The issues are very confused; the state itself is—is in a financial mess. The charter is being revisited because of the abuses of

our state's I mean our—our local police department. The conditions of the poor is just incredible. I mean, we're to a point where we're building shelters to house people who can't feed their children, who can't provide homes for their children. I mean, they're even starting to provide educational programs within these shelters because the kids aren't going to school who are homeless. I mean, you think about the condition of our society, and we're all products of this condition, whether we're products of it from, the lower-income, the middle-income, or the upper-income. We're still products of this society that's plagued with really complex problems and really con—contradictory conditions. I mean, you have a—one of the wealthiest nations in the country, (MC laughs) I guess. But yet you have some of the poorest conditions; I mean the—the poor conditions that we have in this country are extreme. You wouldn't expect to see homeless children who can't get an education in America, you know. So when you come to a campus that is as one termed it, "A working class campus," and these students are coming from this world, they're confused. And they don't know what's going on; I don't know what's going—I cry sometimes when I think about what I have to face when I go out there and really meet my commitment to serve, you know, the people of this country; it's scary, you know. I had a question on the Writing Proficiency Exam that I took, you know, "What would your complaint be about society, you know, that our local government is not meeting?" And I thought what would my complaint be? That wasn't so bad because I could come up with many but I have always believed that you shouldn't make a complaint without a solution. And then when they said, "What is your complaint and then follow up," was and, "What would your solution be to resolve this problem?" Of course, my complaint was the state budget, and I had a—a suggestion. But I thought solutions are so tough and I think that's what's happening with students on campus today. Not just this campus, but across the country. We've got these complicated problems that students don't have answers to. I mean and it's — it's tough and I think that, you know you're talk—crack babies, how do you educate them? I have a friend who's teaching crack children. They're hyper, the—the model that they use to teach children in—in secondary education doesn't work with these kids. You can't get them to sit down. They can't learn the alphabet in the normal way. You got to teach 'em moving. You know, this is not being taught in the schools, you get out there, and you're not really completely prepared to meet these conditions because professors are teaching you what you would learn to—to operate in a normal society, you know, which we all hope that we would walk into when we leave the campus. You know, so I—it's a tough question, you know, and I don't believe it's apathy, though. I think it's — it's — it's pain, I think it's fear, I think it's confusion.

JB: That's an absolutely fascinating insight. I've never heard explained that way, and yet I find that very persuasive. (JB sighs) We—we were talking about two of your major accomplishments as president. Are there others you'd like to recount? Other—others that—that will leave a legacy. You've gone on to law school.

(00:14:57)

MC: I think, and it's tough I guess for anyone, so I won't just say for me, for anyone to speak about the things they've done because you don't want to feel like you're bragging but I read today this piece that said it's really important for us to reflect on the positive things that we've done so that we feel good about what we're doing and not just to look at the—the mistakes. So I feel good that you asked me that question, and I have an opportunity to answer it. I think that one of the things that I feel really, really good about that happened this year that's not something you'd really see on paper, and it won't be in the records, but is the coordination between faculty, administration, and the students. And I think that the students have to play a major role in that. And I think, when I came in, you know, I remember looking at faculty in the Faculty Senate and seeing President Cleary and the administrators and mainly President Cleary and the faculty. And I remember just the distrust and the whole issue was with athletics; the Intercollegiate Athletic Board. And nobody trusted President Cleary and what he was doing, and President Cleary was trying to explain things in the best way that he knew how and—but the faculty were just—you could tell they were totally suspicious and didn't trust him at all. And this Intercollegiate Athletic Advisor Board had been established, and I was sitting on the Board as a voting student and then the other student was nonvoting. One of the things that came up at the end of the year on that Board that was an accomplishment, and I will get back to my other point, is that we started out, they—they said that—first of all, they cut the number of students to two, and then they cut the voting power of students to one. So, basically, you have faculty making the decisions on what they're going to advise to the—the President. So I was kind of frustrated by that because I felt it was unfair to give the AS President a vote and not give the Athletic Representative a vote because they're in the athletic program. So after the work that had gone on over the year, and the respect we had gained on the committee, we were able to get the Board to vote to have the Athletic Representative have a vote on the Intercollegiate Athletic Advisory Board, so that there are two student votes now. And the real accomplishment out of that was that I was unable to attend the meeting where they voted on that, even though I had made the, recommendation. Dr. Sefton, who's a Chair of the Committee, actually do—usually, the Chair doesn't vote, but there was a tie, some faculty (unintelligible) whether to have a student voting or not. And Dr. Broesamle [sic] had to break the tie. I was not available to be there, and Dr. Calloway, who's a Leisure Studies, who was also our Senate Student Senate Advisor, was not able to be there. And Dr. Sefton said he knew that if we were able to be there that that we would've voted to support this, and so he voted to support having the students—so that was an accomplishment. But going back to this the thing with di—di—di—dismissiveness between the administration and the faculty and the students. When we came in, we saw that as we worked toward the middle of the year, we saw faculty and administration at least starting to feel a little better about each other and to talk to each other and show a little more trust. The Faculty President—Faculty Senate President and the University President began to communicate more and have a good relationship; a working, professional relationship as leaders of these two groups. The AS President started to get involved in that communication, and to the point where the Faculty Senate President, the AS President and the University President were actually

communicating with each other on occasion about issues of concern to each group or each constituency being represented. I thought that to see that happen, like I said, it's not something you can write down; it's something that's even difficult to explain. But to see at the end of this year, them being able to speak and communicate and work, you know, this racial harassment pol—policy or this discriminatory harassment policy going through and failing, with the Faculty Senate, but the faculty actually seeing the need to at least address the issue of discrimination on campus, the possibility of discrimination within the classroom by making a motion and promoting it to at least take some steps next year to address this issue; to commit to educating the campus; to commit to these things. I think those are accomplishments that I feel good about. Participating in the, Faculty Senate Retreat and being able to participate in a workshop was rewarding for me because I think it gave an opportunity to share, you know, some of the concerns of the students with the faculty.

(slight pause)

(00:20:19)

JB: This leave so many handles to grab hold on that we're never going to have time to get a hold of them all. But I'd like to—to get ahold of one of them and that's the issue of discriminatory harassment just for a moment. (JB sighs) Um, have you sensed discriminatory harassment on the part of faculty and or on the part of students as a student yourself on the campus?

MC: Um—

JB: Does it exist here?

MC: I think I have. You know it's — it was a funny word in the policy; it was "intent." And I can't go inside of a person and know if their intent was to be discriminatory toward me. But I think I've experienced discrimination. I think that there been preconceived ideas about my performance level in some classes and that my work has been graded on those preconceived ideas. But I've also challenged, whenever I've felt that I've also challenged faculty on that, and I have found that it has worked for me to challenge and I — that's why I supported the policy because I felt that it would empower other students to feel that they could challenge faculty. I think right now students are afraid of the grade. They're afraid to say anything to faculty that would challenge the way that they were graded or—or the way that they feel they were perceived in that classroom or treated in that classroom because they feel that it might affect their grade. I personally feel that from the challenges that I did make, from my experiences that we both left enlightened. I left knowing that whatever happened, it wasn't deliberate and in one case I know it was discrimination and the faculty person would never admit it. But one thing that I do know is that it was discrimination because of this faculty's, this faculty person's buying in—this faculty person buying into stereotypes, and so, I wasn't angry. And that, you

know, was what was wonderful about working on the Racial Awareness Committee and working with Lillian Roybal Rose, it was because I came to understand that all acts of discrimination are not deliberate. Some are simply unconscious socialization, you know. And so you just do what you've been socialized to think and do. And that was when we said the policy was educationally based and promoted awareness raising. That's why we wanted our policy to pass and we felt it was different than say U of M, which was punitive and different, and other different punitive policies, our was designed to bring people into a forum to come to a better understanding. Now when it's two people or five people sitting in a room discussing it, you can all say "Great, that's a great idea," but when you put that policy out there for review to thirty thousand students and a thousand or three thousand faculty—I'm not sure how many we have—then it becomes a concern because it looks like a policy that could be punitive that can cause somebody, you know, a bad reputation or ru—ruin their reputation if they're challenged. I think dis—discrimination does exist, but I think it's more amongst the students than it is the faculty because I've seen much more overt racism acted tow—on me from students. I mean I had a student literally just, you know, go off on me in class. We're talking about Huckleberry Finn and the word "nigger," the use of the word "nigger," and the faculty person who was leading the class brought up some information about a guy in the Midwest who said that, "This shouldn't be taught to junior high students because they're too young. It can be taught in high school or college, but not to junior high because what will happen is the kids will go around calling little black kids niggers. So, you know, I agreed with that. I think that Huckleberry Finn is a great book, but I—I agreed with that. There were several other students in the classroom who agreed with that, too. I was the only black student in the class, which was normally the case for me throughout the English Depar—De— my experience in the English Department. And this student, Tim, who I was friends with and please don't use Tim's name but who I was friends with I thought, for a year. We had studied in other classes together, talked about literature, everything. I said something about that, and—and I said, "I just felt that Huckleberry Finn could be taught but I just don't feel it's appropriate to kids." And Tim stood up and he said, "You people kill me." All of the sudden, I was 'you people,' so I knew he was dealing with some problems inside. And he said, "You people kill me. You can call each other nigger this, nigger that, but if I, a white boy, call you nigger then there's something wrong with it." And I looked at him, I said, "Tim, I don't believe you're saying that to me." And I said, "First of all, how did I become 'you people?' I'm Michelle, and, you know, I don't call other blacks niggers, okay? I don't do that. And I hear—I hear people do it, but you have to understand oppression and how it works, and I'm not getting into that discussion in this classroom because we're talking about Huckleberry Finn and teaching it to seventh graders. And he says, "I, William F—" he picks up his book, "I am reading William Faulkner..." one of the rac—most racist writers of his time, mind you, and he uses him to support his argument. And he goes, "And I'm reading The Slave; the black maid says to her son, 'Come here, nigger,'" or something like that he read. I said, "'Tom,' I mean Tim," I said, "I know you're not using that to substantiate your argument because William Faulkner is one of the most racist writers." He goes and then I said, "But I'm—this is not the time or the place to get into this. I'm

not going to debate this with you. We need to go on with class. Well, after class was over, Tim came over to my class and slammed his hand on my desk and was completely in my face, and the class was still there, the faculty person was still there, and he goes, he goes, "You're trying to imply that I'm racist?" I said, "No, Tim, I never said that. But I disagree with you, and I don't think using William Faulkner supports your argument." He goes, "You think I'm racist," he goes, "It's those people over in AS who are racist. Do you think they care about you? They don't care about you. They don't like you, Michelle, don't you know that?" He goes, "They're the ones who are racist." I said, he says, "You know that they're going to do to you? They're going to," he went from being racist to sexist. He goes, "They're going to cut your tits off and leave you to dry." And I looked at—and the faculty person's standing there, not saying anything. And my eyes were filled with water, but I said, "Well nobody's doing anything, everybody is just watching." So I stood up and I said, "Tim, get out of my face." This guy is 6'3;" nobody has done anything, and I'm sitting there. Now, if that's not being a victim in a hostile environment, I don't know what is. And I just—after that, that woke me up and that made me realize that, you know, in the classroom, I would not discuss controversial issues on racism. I would let white students discuss it.

(00:27:58)

JB: (unintelligible)

Mc: Oh, it wasn't worth the sacrifice to me of being put in that position because I wasn't supported.

JB: You're (JB sighs) a mature and eloquent person, what if you had been a freshman?

MC: That was my whole point with the racial harassment policy and that is why supported it one hundred percent because I told them, you know, I said, "I'm a returning student, you know." But I said, "Can you imagine if I was eighteen years old and I felt discrimination in the classroom, I'm not—I'm just going to close off and not participate and feel isolated and feel that all white people are bad, you know, and they're out to hurt me. I said, "I know better," you know, because I'd been supported by so many different people from so many different backgrounds, and I support people from all backgrounds. But I'm older, you know, I've been in the workforce, etc. But, for me, that was devastating. Now, I am not saying that when I would not speak in the classroom on controversial issues again, that I was afraid. It was just dealing from a level of what I would call experience and spiritual growth. It wasn't worth the argument to me to argue with someone who's not going to see my point and risk making people think that I am limited or parochial in my views. It wa—because that's what happens. When you take a position to talk about an issue—if you're a minority, people will argue you into a point where they make you appear parochial because you're dealing with one issue. They'll make it seem as if you applied across the board to every and anything, and that's not true. And I will not allow anybody to put me in the position to make me appear that

way. And it—actually, that happened. Something happened to me again this semester in a Narrative Writing course, where we were talking about some material and it was actually a—a faculty person who put me on the spot and had the whole class upset at me and, you know, telling me she resented me saying that she didn't — that the class didn't understand the certain part of my sto—possibly did not understand the certain of my story because of the cultural difference. Well I wasn't trying to make anybody resent me, I was saying that was a fact. I mean there are certain things that a person can tell me from an upper—middle-class white experience that I wouldn't understand because I'm not an upper middle-class white. And all I was saying was these are conditions that I even had to learn about because I didn't live say in the ghetto, you know? So I was just saying that I'm trying to explain this to you and she just went off on me and I—the—the faculty person. So I stayed with her two hours after that class and I told her, "I understand you getting upset"—no, I said, "I don't understand you getting upset with me. I understand you saying you resented what I said or resented me suggesting that you couldn't understand me." But I said once I explained myself, and said that wasn't what I was saying at all. For you to still attack me in the way that you did," I said, "It hurt me because—"

[END OF TRACK 2]