Oral History Transcript
John Broesamle Suddenly a Giant: A History of CSUN Collection
Interviewee Laurence Caretto = LC
Interviewed by John Broesamle = JB
Interview conducted on September 25, 1989 at an unspecified location
Transcribed by: Katherine Sirca
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Biographical Note:
Laurence Caretto earned his B.A. and Ph.D. at UCLA. He was hired as faculty for the engineering program in 1971. He was asked to serve on the university's Task Force on General Education in 1974, and was chosen as chair.

Interview Transcription

Tape 1, Side A

JB: Larry, what were the origins of general education reform, in your opinion, in the nineteen-seventies?

LC: Well, for me, it was when I got a call from Harry Finestone asking me to serve in the general education task force. And I was a relatively new faculty member there, so, um, I have to go basically by memory, but I think the main concern was that the general education program that was in force at the time had been set up during the 1960s. And as most of us recall, that time was a period of questioning, where we were questioning why we make requirements, and since we couldn't find any good answers, we abolished requirements. When I first came to this campus, the general education program allowed so much freedom of choice that a student could get through without taking an English composition course. Could get through with having various kinds of alternatives. I remember Jerry Richfield saying, you could either take a literature course or a course in Matador marching band and they counted to satisfy the same requirement. You could get through the science program without ever taking a course in chemistry, physics, biology, or mathematics, and I think that there was a thought that was coming up in the mid-seventies that this needed to be redressed, and that we had to go back to make something out of general education that was more meaningful.

JB: What were the origins of that sentiment? Could you detect where that was coming from? Was that a kind of general campus consciousness, or was it from specific entities within the university?

LC: Well, again, for me, I had only been on campus about three years, and, being in engineering, was a little bit sort of isolated from the people who were really concerned

about general education. My main focus, for, where I heard the concern, it was mainly from Harry Finestone, who was then the vice president—well, the title is now vice president, whatever Elizabeth Berry's job is, I'm not sure if he was called vice president or not. But basically, the person who is in charge of undergraduate education. And I know he was very concerned about this. And I think he represented a group of faculty who had a very strong concern about the quality of our general education program's focus. And I think Harry played a strong role essentially in selecting the people who wound up being on the GE task force.

JB: Why reform then? Why in the early seventies?

LC: Um, I think it was just a period of reaction that the general education program that had been put in place before I got here, the one that was very unstructured, had had some time to be put into place. The fact that we'd(??) had an opportunity to see students going through the program, to see the results of it. And I think there was a strong feeling that the faculty had abdicated its responsibility for giving curricular guidance to the students. So, I would think of it as a reactionary kind of movement. Not reactionary in a kind of knee jerk, but a very healthy reactionary movement, saying, Well, we've tried this, we see what's happened because of that, and we don't like it. And maybe all those questions we were asking ourselves in the sixties really do have answers, and maybe we are smart enough to design an appropriate general education program for our students.

JB: We've talked about the origins of your involvement, specifically in this. There were some, are some who might consider it interesting or unusual that a professor at engineering, newly arrived at the campus, would find himself leading a task force charged with this kind of healthy reaction. Did you find that to be an idiosyncratic position to be in?

LC: Yes. (Both laugh) In fact, I think part of it is, I mentioned earlier that Harry was responsible for selecting a lot of the individuals, and part of it was because I'd been hired on this campus in engineering to work in developing programs in environmental engineering, which is an area you generally work in in terms of air quality. And my first year on this campus there was a moved toward getting an interdisciplinary environmental studies major. Although nothing ever came of it, I was on that committee, and I met Harry, and at that point, I had, you know several conversations with him. And I remember when he called me up to ask me to be on the task force, you know, I declined and I said, "I don't know anything about general education. That's not my field." I says, "You know, all I could do is make intelligent comments, but, you know, I'd have no preconceived notions." He says, "That's why we want you. We're looking for somebody who'd, you know, come to us with clean slate, and have no prejudices." And in fact, I said no a couple of times, and finally Paul Walker was in the executive VP called and asked me, and I had just gotten an early promotion and I got one of these nice letters saying you should be of future service to the university. I thought it was very, you know,

inappropriate of me to turn down this request for service after the university that had just, you know, given me this fine reward, so I finally said yes. And I had thought I would just be, you know, one other member of a twelve or so member task force, and I was very surprised when at the first or second meeting, I think the second meeting, I got elected chair. And again, I think it was basically for the same reason that Harry said he wanted me on the task force, was that everybody was perceived as having some particular want, and that I was perceived as being a person who had no particular ax to grind and could serve fairly as chair. So, it was idiosyncratic, yes, but I think the reasons for it, I sort of understood at the time.

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JB: How, uh—we've already touched on this, but perhaps we could touch on it more at length. How would you characterize the reforms that we instituted? Were they sweeping? Were they more conservative than perhaps was imagined at the time? To what extent did we change general education?

LC: Well, again, you have to remember that we were an independent task force that was constructed so that we could make recommendations that would carry moral persuasion but would have no final authority. And that, of course, had to be done by the Educational Policies Committee. I think that when you look at, you know—I sort of looked at three stages. There's the program that actually emerged from EPC, which balanced all the various campus interests, in addition to the goals of general education. There's the final report that emerged from the task force, which, to me, was supposedly aimed just at the of the goals of general education with hopefully minimal knowledge and worries about FTE [full time equivalent] implications and the like. And then there was sort of the kind of initial discussions that we had in the task force, where before we started planning a structured program, we thought of what there might be. And I think those discussions proposed some of the most sweeping reforms. I can remember one thought would be that there would be some sort of czar of general education. That there would be a core curriculum where all students would take, more or less, a certain set of courses, and that the instructors of those courses would somehow be handled as they are in interdisciplinary programs where a department would contribute a faculty member to this interdisciplinary GE program. And that there would be a very tightly constructed, you know, general education program, so that when the student completed general education, an upper division faculty member could say, Well, this is a Northridge GE student, and we know this student knows these certain things because that student has had the general education. I can remember the meeting where after we split into subcommittees, the administrative committee invited several department chairs in to float this idea, and I've never, you know, seen so much negative reaction in my life. So, getting back to your question, I think that the—when you think about the kinds of sweeping reforms that we were proposing in our initial discussions, perhaps the final result really is not so sweeping. And if you think about trying to have a core curriculum, where students

all study more or less the same thing, I think that we also didn't manage to do that. In some areas, for example, in the Humanities Program, I think there is that kind of structure, where you know the student has had a course in literature, has had a course in philosophy or religious studies, had a course in _____(??) art I've already forgotten(??). But I guess my final impression is that the program that came out was not so sweeping as we might've considered, but was certainly a significant change over the program that was in effect at the time.

JB: Are you gratified by the results, or were you disappointed by the results?

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LC: Um. I think, in essence, I was gratified. I think, you know, one is always disappointed when you come up with what you know is the right program and it's not totally accepted by everybody else. But I think that the kinds—that if you look at the general education program that ultimately emerged from EPC—you know, look at our task force reports—you'll see a very large degree of overlap. In fact, the main difference is, it seemed to me, were ones where the section of the applied arts and sciences was, that our committee had recommended not be placed in and was placed in. I think there was the requirement for Western Civilization was added by EPC that was not in our task force report. There were a lot of other kinds of wording changes in terms of the rationale, things like that. But otherwise, I think the structure that was placed in the final GE program was pretty much the same as the task force. We happened to say that we probably had a very strong influence on that. I think one of the things that I'm promised of is the ethnic studies requirement, or international, international cross-cultural requirements that we have there. This is something our task force talked about in '74, '75, '76, and it's something where now you still see stories in the paper, universities today are considering as to whether or not they should do this, and here's a requirement that we've had in effect for over ten years. So, I think here's a case where we were really over in the vanguard doing something, and I think we did that also without any particular pressure. There was nobody saying that they thought we should do this. No radical movement coming up and saying, We're going to shut the university down unless you put this requirement in. There was no pressure, it was just something that we all felt was the right thing to do.

JB: It's an interesting reaction when you think of this as a reaction against a libertine phase of curriculum. Its rather a reformist sort of reaction, isn't it?

LC: Yes.

JB: What were the origins of that decision, that this was the proper thing to do? That is, there was no external pressure coming on the task force. Where did the idea come from to add those six units that _____(??) our international(??) cross-cultural studies(??)?

LC: I honestly don't know. You know, there are certain things that people mention, and you sort of say, yes, that's right, we should do that. And for all I know, you were the first person to mention it. Maybe Jerry Richfield was. I honestly have no idea who the first person was to mention it. Perhaps it was somebody in the open hearings the task force held that mentioned it. I really don't know who you can give credit to the idea for. But I do remember that it was not an idea that was really debated in our task force. Nobody ever said, oh, we should or shouldn't do this. It was an idea that seemed to be almost readily accepted by, you know, most of the task force. I don't really remember it being, you know, a significant issue as other, you know, parts of the recommendations were.

JB: Let me ask you a broad question which you may want to subdivide, a bit. But let me ask it broadly. How political, for want of a better term, how political was the process by which, first to last, general education was reformed in the early and mid nineteen-seventies?

LC: Well, um, I'm not sure what went into the selection of the different members of the task force and who was involved in doing that. We were a presidential task force. We were appointed by the president. And I've always assumed that most of the members were suggested to the president by Harry Finestone or by other people whom he was talking to, because he was the one who, from my conversations, had the pivotal administrative role in getting the thing started. I don't think it was something that President Cleary said, Yes, we need general education reform on this campus and I'm going to do it. Rather, I think it was Harry who said, You know, we need this. I'm going to get the president to appoint a task force. How political the choice of the people was, I don't know. I did think that the task force approached its job with a kind of a notion of saying, Well, what is general education? When we started meeting, we spent several weeks just talking about things in general. And at our first meeting, everybody started saying, well, here's what we should do. And I remember there were two or three people who said, look. General education is a very important resource question for departments and schools. It doesn't matter what you think general education should be. If people are going to gain or lose FTE, they're going to be opposed to it. So, what we need to do is we need to find out who has what FTE in general education, and simply shuffle it around so that doesn't change. And most of the task force says, no, we can't do that. I mean, that's not what we're here for. There's bound to be some sort of subsequent process by which that will take place, but that's not our mission. Um, none of us—you know, I mentioned that the reason that Harry said he wanted me was because I had a clean mind, or empty mind, or whatever. A clean slate. There's some cliché I'm searching for here. None of us, of course, ever come to any process without having some preformed opinions or thoughts or things like that. Um, and I'm not sure, for example, that the chairman in the English Department was happy that the speech course wound up being there. So, you know, John Clendenning at that time was a member of the task force. Now, maybe he didn't want the speech department there. I don't know. So, I'd like to think that we tried to operate as free as possible of political things. I do think there were certain decisions we made for what I would call wrong

reason. One of them was the decision not to include a foreign language requirement. We simply said, look. We just can't do that. If there were a foreign language requirement at Northridge, everyone would go to a community college because, you know, nobody has a foreign language requirement. We can't afford to be the only damn(??)campus that would do that. And that's why foreign language always has this sort of funny position in general education, because it's where exactly could you put it, and it sort of seems to get, you know, bumped around from place-to-place. I guess I'm making our task force sound as if we were lily white, and I'm sure we weren't. But I think that we did try to approach it from the standpoint of saying, Well, you know, what makes good general education and what should students have? I think the process that our task force report went through in the Educational Policies Committee quite properly involved the interested departments who have, I guess, a stake in general education. Once you accept the thesis that was present in the task force report, that general education on this campus was going to mean breadth—a series of breadth requirements, as opposed to a core curriculum—it gets difficult to say, well, how do you define breadth without, you know, including every course in the university catalog as general education? And, obviously the departments would feel that they should be included or shouldn't be included or it should be structured so that they had a good shot at that. I think the fact that the process that we recommended EPC do and they actually did, was that when they formally adopted our recommendations, they did not adopt a series of courses. We didn't adopt courses. We simply said, these are the areas. I've noticed it's pretty obvious if you're going to require English composition, the English department is going to have a fairly healthy part of the curriculum there. But I think that sort of helped, because, you know, the departments or schools couldn't really be sure exactly what the implications would be. There's, you know, certain obvious implications they could draw, but I think that helped at least to keep it on the plane of what students should or should not have. But I, as the chair of the task force, did attend most of the EPC meetings, and you could tell that there was, you know, a certain amount of self-interest that's involved. But you know, that's part of our political system, whether it's a governmental system or a campus one.

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JB: To what extent do we ever come, in your estimate, rather than a parochial or political or interest in our source-oriented concerns, in instituting institute what I think you called a lily-white program? In other words, to what extent was it, um, a curriculum which was strictly curricular, and what extent was it, would you say, it was altered by externals, realities, political concerns and the like?

LC: Well, there's a lot of different kinds of concerns. I remember that when you were on the task force as a member of the social sciences that, you know, there was a proposal that you'd brought forth for having more interdisciplinary courses in the social sciences. And that there was a lot of feeling, then, from some of the faculty that no, we just don't want to take time. This is too new, too radical, and we just can't do this. I mean, the

university doesn't give us the kind of release time, the kind of resources that we need to develop these courses. There were faculty who came and
taught interdisciplinary courses and said, Look, were not going to do this again. I mean, this is just too much work. We really enjoyed doing this, but we just can't do it. So, you know, those are very practical considerations and you sort of have to say, Well, it's nice to be purely curricular, but you also have to look at the realities of, you know—there's going to be faculty members who are going to be asked to teach these courses, and if they really don't have the time, they really don't have the ability to develop the courses in terms of the times made available to them, then you have to say, Well, no. That's a great idea, but we just can't afford to do it. So, I think there was a lot of that. In terms of the, you know, the foreign curricular recommendations, um—as I say, I think there was, that the program, you know, was fairly reasonable in terms of the curricular recommendations it wound up with. That it did—that the main approach was to try to say, um, we should have these kinds of requirements, because they are important. I mentioned earlier that there was a notion of adding the section on the applied arts and sciences and the Western civilization requirement that was done in EPC. I think you could argue if you look at Western civilization, people could argue that, purely on a curricular basis, that should or should not be in general education. And that's obviously a curricular issue. To the chair of the History Department, he or she would see that as a very important resource issue. So, it's very difficult to separate these issues.

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JB: It's certainly a complex process, from first to last, in differing involvements, as I recall it, of practical, what might be called practical, as opposed to theoretical or spiritual or unpragmatic concerns. I recall very well the incident you were mentioning when I brought forth what I thought was a brilliant plan for the social sciences. Others didn't think it was so brilliant, or they thought it was brilliant but it wouldn't work, and we had to backtrack, what happened(??). In the process of this, was faith maintained on the whole between the professional schools and the liberal arts, would you say?

LC: Well, I think that the—there was the notion in our report that the applied arts and sciences section—which was in the previous GE program as in the current GE program, but was not in task force report—that there were, you know, very useful and important subjects in there. You know the journalism department teaches some course on, you know, the freedom of the press. That's you know, very useful sort of course that could contribute to students' breadth. But that might find some other appropriate point in the general education program, rather than having to create this whole separate thing there. And, I think that there—my impression is that there was a kind of a tension between the social science, social and behavioral science school, that they saw that as largely an encroachment on the social sciences, because these sorts of courses would largely end up there. And I think that the professional schools then felt that it was in their interest to have their own section. There was enough support of that so there wouldn't be this encroachment on the more traditional areas of GE. The other thing, I think, is the

question of the exemption for the majors with large units. As you know, our task force recommended that a certain amount of overlap credit be allowed, which generally was not allowed, and that waivers and exemptions be allowed. I think that the, probably the faculty in engineering would say that there were not enough waivers granted. On the other hand, if you look at the total size of the general education program, plus the Title Five units that have to be taken by all of our students, you know, look at the waivers that students in engineering have, they are essentially considered to have equivalence to a large part of the general education program, even though it isn't exactly a perfect match. So, it's like any other kind of decision you make that—I'm sure that neither side when you have disagreement is perfectly happy, but I think that certainly the notion that the professional schools wanted of being able to offer professional(??) courses in general education to remain in there, and that the needs of their students to have some exemption from having a very large GE package, which would possibly duplicate some of the courses that were already present in the major, was also something that remains in general education.

JB: Did you ever feel strongly toward any of these issues of, on the one hand, the exemptions—waivers for departments with large majors, with accreditation problems—as against what I always perceived to be the rather strong liberal arts bias of the task force itself? That ever put you in a bind? Either as chair or later?

LC: No. No, because I was never—the task force never said, only grant so many exemptions. So, I was never in a bind where I had to say, well, look, you know, this is enough exemptions. The task force simply said, "Look. We'll state this is a principle that exemptions should be granted. Um, I think—I later felt that it should be possible to, perhaps, restructure some of the general education offerings. I've had a concern over the ability of some of engineering students in terms of their writing, and I've often thought that it'd be possible to design a course for engineering students where there would be fewer units but they would be more intense, would involve more writing, more upper division kinds of courses. And, so that speaking strictly as a faculty member in the School of Engineering and Computer Science, and not as a member of the task force, I might've wished there would be more exemptions granted. But that was after I was on the task force, so I didn't really see that as a conflict.

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JB: One of the things we were talking about over lunch as we discussed these patterns of development in this program, is that it was a particularly inapt time in which to reconsider basic education on this campus, in that we were going through a so-called steady state. There was an enormous enrollment shift out of the humanities and social sciences. A little bit(??) of anxiety about protecting jobs, approaching paranoia in the minds of some, yet somehow, we overcame that. Is that how you perceive it? That we did in fact overcome a great many obstacles that might not have been there five years before, even five years later?

LC: Well, I think some of those things, rather than being obstacles, actually worked towards getting the expanded program adopted, because I think there was a tremendous sense that although the university was at steady state, that majors like engineering and business were gaining at the expense of the more traditional social sciences. And essentially what that meant was rather than having a student, say, choose English over history, where that student might still be taking the same number of electives, the student would go into engineering or business and would suddenly have no electives that would be available for that student to take. So, I think that part of what you called the paranoia, you know, led to the idea that yes, we should have more general education. We should strengthen the requirements. I think that there was a lot of difficulty in getting started, because I remember, during our first semester of operation, we had an open faculty meeting, and there were a lot of people saying, What are you guys doing? We know what the status quo is, and we're afraid of change! Sort of in that sense, I think that we did manage to overcome that. I mean, you know, we just said we're going to go ahead and do it.

JB: An issue which has convulsed other campuses, could have convulsed this thing, but somehow the process, in my reflection anyway, seemed much smoother than it might've been, given the circumstances of the time. Do you read it that way? That it went better and easier than it might have?

LC: I don't know. I don't really have any basis for comparison. I think that the—a large part of it was that the task force was set up and met, and I think the fact that we took nearly three years to complete our task gave people a lot of time to think about it, and get used to the idea. As you recall, it was, I think it was just after we completed our work that the chancellor's group on general education recommended a new system-wide program, and that took a lot of people by surprise. The first time a lot of people heard about that was when they got the final report. Now, I think that on our campus, the task force made a real effort to reach out, to get people involved. At least to make them know that this was going on, so that, I think, people were aware. They were ready for it when it went to EPC. EPC was aware of it, ready for it. The faculty were ready to debate it actively before EPC. And that I think that what we probably did on this campus was to substitute, you know, time for having an intense conflict, that is simply taking the time to have the issue raised and discussed and get the conscious of the people ready to talk about it.

JB: So, what seemed like traditionally slow and torturous academic processes were really functional in terms of bringing in change, even despite the years spent.

LC: I personally—

JB: <u>— (??)</u> the years spent.

LC: I've come to that conclusion. Maybe it's just justification for all the years that we spent, but I think so, yes.

JB: Well, let me turn to a more personal dimension in a moment. I see that it's time to change our tape. Lights are flashing.

[END OF INTERVIEW]