Oral History Transcript
CSUN Leaders
Interviewee Mary Beth Walker = MW
Interviewed by Jessica Kim = JK
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JK: Today is Friday, August 18, 2023 and this is Jessica Kim. I'm in Los Angeles, California and on a Zoom call with Dr. Mary Beth Walker, who served as Provost at California State University, Northridge from 2019 to 2022. She continued to work with the university as professor of economics in the David Nazarian College of Business and Economics. We're about to begin recording her oral history. This interview will become part of the Campus Leadership Oral History Project. Dr. Walker served as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at California State University, Northridge, from 2019 to 2022. In this position, she prioritized student success and established an office of student success led by an associate vice president, the office focused on eliminating equity gaps in retention and graduation. Under her leadership, four-year graduation rates improved from less than 15% to nearly 25%. Despite the challenges of a global pandemic, she also prioritized research productivity and supported a record amount of grant and contract funding at the university. Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Dr. Walker also helped establish a set of diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI] grants, which gives out $500,000 in funding to support students, staff and faculty in DEI projects. Immediately prior to her role at CSUN, she served as Interim President for Georgia Gwinnett College, part of the University System of Georgia. Prior to that, Dr. Walker was the Associate Provost for Strategic Initiatives and Innovation at Georgia State University from 2017 to 2019, and the dean of the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies from 2010 to 2017. She began her career in higher education as a faculty member in economics at Emory University in 1986, and then at Georgia State University beginning in 1991. Her educational background includes a bachelor's degree in economics and math from Rhodes College, and a master's degree and a PhD in economics from Rice University. Dr. Walker has enjoyed a distinguished career as a researcher, teacher, and administrator in higher education. She's presented and published widely on topics such as mortgage lending, marriage tax and timing, race and gender and education, the economics of education at the primary and secondary levels, and wages and low-wage service occupations. It's an honor to be with you today, Dr. Walker, and to have you tell your story and share your insights. When and where were you born?

MW: I'm excited to be here with you and have the opportunity to speak with you today. I was born a very long time ago in a small town in Missouri, called Kennett.

JK: And what was your—

MW: I'm not going to tell you when.

JK: [both laugh] That's fine. Tell me about your parents and your family background, especially in your early life.

MW: Well, my father died when I was only five years old. And so, my mom raised us; my brother and my sister and I. My mom was a really remarkable person that I have appreciated more as a grown-up, of course. My mom dropped out of high school to get married when she was, like, 17. And then when I was growing up, she worked at a factory. She worked in manufacturing. And then she went back to college. She took that GED test [General Educational Development]. And she went to college, when I was a freshman in high school, she went to a public regional university in Missouri, Southeast Missouri State, and she got a bachelor's degree in history, actually. And then, interestingly, she went back to work for that same company, that manufacturing company, she went back to work in human resources. So, she went back in a management position instead of in—I find that a remarkable story that she was able to do that and raise us. We definitely did not appreciate her enough when we were kids. So—

JK: You think, and this jumps ahead a little bit to your own experiences of thinking about college and pursuing higher education, but did watching your mom do that shape how you thought about education, higher education, and what you wanted to do?

MW: Well, from the very beginning, and I don't know this might have come from my one set of my paternal grandparents, although my father was not a college graduate that—And from my mom, there was never any doubt that she expected us to go to college. I mean that was not even something that we would even have questioned because we knew that that was the expectation. But then, of course, seeing her go to college and all that also made it really clear how important that was. And so, it definitely had an effect on us. Actually, we did not call those Pell Grants back then. But I was Pell eligible that we, it was called, like a supplemental education opportunity grant or something like that, that helped me go to college.

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JK: And we'll come back to that. But I want you to spend a little bit more time talking about your childhood. So, given this expectation that you and your siblings would attend college, did that also shape like your K through 12 education and experience? Did you grow up liking school? What were your experiences in early education?

MW: Yeah, that's taken me back. But actually, yes, I did like school. I always liked to read, and I'm pretty good at math. And so those two things, let's face it, that helps you in school it helps you be successful in school. I took some [pauses] teasing from people who maybe were resentful that my scores were high and stuff like that. And so that made me kind of sensitive about it. But it didn't change what I did, so—

JK: And was there a gendered aspect to your experiences, especially given that you excelled in math, at a time where, you know, that expectation was not always there for girls and young women?

MW: Yeah, I mean, it did for sure. You know, it was unexpected. But it was like, "So what?" I mean, I was a child who wanted to have friends and wanted to, you know—I wasn't a loner at all. And so, I'm looking back now I'm surprised it didn't worry me more. But of all the things I worried about when I was a little kid, being good at math and taking some heat for it was not one of them.

JK: [Laughs] When you were a K through 12 student did you have some idea of what you wanted to do professionally as you grew into adulthood?

MW: Yeah, but it was all wrong. I mean, [laughs] I, at one point, I thought that I wanted to be an engineer, because I had a cousin who was an engineer, and I thought that was cool. And, I thought, "Oh, that's a math thing." You know? And so, I thought that for a while. And then I thought I took an AP Psychology class. And I thought, "Oh well, I want to major in that." And so, those are the kinds of things that were in my head then. I do remember—and this is a sign of the times—I do remember when I was a little kid, somebody asked me what I wanted to be when I grow up. I mean, why do adults ask children that, right? But I remember I said, I wanted to be a doctor. I mean, I was seven years old. And they said, "Oh, you mean a nurse?" And I remember my seven-year-old self, thinking, “No, I don't!” [laughs]

JK: That's amazing. So, you said there was always this expectation in your household and on the part of your mother that you and your siblings would attend college. So, what was that process of applying to college and selecting one and then kind of entering into higher education? What was that experience like for you?

MW: Well, it's so different now, in the way that kids apply to multiple colleges. And I applied to Rhodes College. My sister, my older sister lived in Memphis, Tennessee, which is where Rhodes College is. And I applied to Rhodes College because my sister lived there. And I applied to the regional college where my mom had gone, and that's it, you know? A lot of my friends were applying to the University of Missouri. And I think maybe, because of that, I didn't want to do that, you know? I wanted to do something different. And so, there you go. [laughs]

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JK: And what was that transition like from high school to Rhodes College, and your first years as an undergraduate, what were those like?

MW: Well, that was a rough awakening for me. There were two reasons for that. Boy, oh, boy, was I not the smartest kid in the school anymore. You know, I mean, everybody was so sharp and knowledgeable. And I had grown up, really, very poor and in this small town, and so a lot of the kids I went to school with, were very, were from upper middle-class families and, and they just knew stuff and could do things. Socially, I felt very out of it. And that actually, I remember that being hard so—and I did fine as an undergraduate. You know, I did that major in econ and math, and I certainly perform well and all that, but it wasn't the same feeling of excelling, that was, let's face it, easier to do in high school. So—

JK: And this jumps ahead a little bit, I'll come back to your college experiences. But you mentioned your experiences as a young person then feeling out of place once you got to college. Do you think that shaped your approach to your work at Northridge? Because it sounds like your own background, especially as a child and a young person is somewhat similar to the CSUN student population.

MW: Yes, I mean, in some ways, and not in other ways. But there's some similarity there about feeling a little bit like an outsider. And so, I have a lot of understanding, I think, of the need for undergraduates to have spaces and places and things set up to make it easier for them to form cohorts, for them to gather a group of people around—find opportunities. So, I do have a real understanding of how that makes a difference.

JK: And that you were going to be a math and economics major was that- At what point did you discover that that was kind of your passion and what you wanted to major in?

MW: Well, I'll tell you, I loved calculus. [laughs] Although third semester of calculus was one of the hardest classes I ever took, but I really liked it. And I thought I wanted to be, just a pure math major. And then I took economics and economics is a Gen Ed [general education] requirement for all kinds of different majors. And so, I've seen that connection. You know, I liked the real-world applicability. And so, I'd say to people, to this day, "I don't know whether I majored in economics, because that's the way I think, or whether I think the way I do because I majored in economics." I mean, I really don't know which came first. But a lot of the common-sense issues there. That's what they feel like, to me, common sense issues. And so, then I put that together with math. It was just a really good combination.

JK: And at what point as an undergraduate did you decide to pursue a graduate degree?

MW: I had a couple of faculty members who I found very impressive. And Rhodes is a liberal arts college. I mean, there was even, I remember, there was a fuss about creating too many accounting classes, because they were saying, "Oh, no, accounting is not liberal arts!" You know, isn't that funny that we would say that and think that now? But I never took accounting. But I would see the faculty and they were mostly teachers, there was really no research expectation, I don't think. And that appealed to me. It appealed to me both in where you work, being on a college campus and the environment in which you do that job. I remember thinking that was very appealing. And so, I think that's what got me into the idea. And then a couple of faculty members really urged me, "Yeah, yeah, you should apply to grad school." And so, that's what I did.

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JK: And do you think like, I guess I'm curious about hearing more about your experiences as a young woman, I mentioned this earlier, in fields where women have traditionally been underrepresented.

MW: Oh, yeah, and econ is one of those areas. But here's something interesting. Around the time I was in grad school for a couple years before me, and maybe 10 years after me, there were a lot of women getting PhDs in economics. And a lot of economics departments were hiring a female professor, you know. And so, I felt like I was kind of part of that group. And it wasn't the isolating feeling that it is. I mean, if I had gone to graduate school in engineering, for example, that would have been quite different. But the sad thing is, and it's interesting, and I guess there's been some research into why, is that's kind of reversed. And there's not as many young women going into grad school in economics as there were. So, the numbers are shrinking. And I don't know why that is. I mean, because in the early days, it was the math barrier. And so, when I got into, grad school, I was in great shape in terms of the mathematics. I was ready. And so that was not an issue for me. But now, oh my gosh, now the math requirements are so much higher than the ones that I had satisfied, but women are all over that. So, it's not that, that's no longer the barrier. So, I'm not really sure why it doesn't feel like a welcoming place. Because one of the things in getting a PhD in economics, there are both academic jobs and nonacademic jobs that are interesting, rewarding. In some areas, with a PhD, it's harder to find an academic job. And so, you have to really think about what are the alternatives to an academic career. But econ would seem to me, and to others, to have solved that problem, because there's so many others. You know, you can go be an economist at the World Bank. You can be an economist at the Bureau of the Census. You know, fascinating work.

JK: This is two interrelated questions: What was your experience like in graduate school and what drove your research interests as a graduate student?

MW: Well, the experience was mostly positive. You know, there were bumps and stuff along the way. And I ended up specializing in econometrics. And so that's the statistical analysis of economic data. And I love statistics, actually. But I didn't really know what I was going to do. I ended up working with my mentor, my dissertation advisor—two different individuals. One left when I was just really trying to get started on my dissertation work. And that really threw me back. It threw me off in terms of being able to make any progress. But then another faculty member came, an econometrician, and he and I hit it off in terms of working together. And so, what I do think if it had been, like, a labor economist or a public finance economist said—if they had showed up, and I had had that connection with them, it's very likely I would have still done a lot of statistical work. But it would have been slanted in a different way. So, I think that that made a difference. And then, my husband and I started dating when I was in graduate school, he was getting his PhD in economics as well. So that also had an impact on my experiences in grad school, so—

JK: You mentioned that economists can do many things, but you decided to pursue a career in higher education. Was that still shaped by your undergraduate experience? And you had mentors and you thought this is a really like, this is a cool job!

MW: Yup! Yeah, nope, absolutely true. I decided I was going to give the academic job market a try. Although in grad school, I got much more interested in research, and publishing, and working on things that were publishable, and I didn't want to give that up. You know, I didn't want to step

away from that. And so, I decided I had—I can't remember now, but I had a set of schools that I interviewed at. And if those didn't work out, then I would look at something else. But that was the way I was thinking about it. And I wanted a place that would have a balance between research and teaching. And so yeah, that's definitely, that still was in my mind, although I could see myself working at all these other kinds of jobs. But I wanted to give that a good shot first.

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JK: And how were your early experiences as a faculty member?

MW: Oh, God. [Laughs] Well, that was a hard time, you know? And it's hard, because, nobody's your boss, you know what I mean? And like you're teaching for the first time. I mean, I've taught when I was a grad student, and you're trying to get stuff going, and you've got to be so self-motivated to keep your work going forward, and to get published, to get it out under review. And it's hard. That was a very hard period, to get that going, you know? I was really lucky that I changed from Emory University, which was my first job, which is a great place. But the economics department at Georgia State University was so much stronger at that time. And Emory has changed enormously over the years. And so has Georgia State. But the thing about Georgia State, there were a lot of the faculty—their research was very much applied and used a lot of [statistics]—so they were so happy for me to be there. When I interviewed at CSUN, I would say, "You know, I'm a team player. I like working with people, I like collaborating with people." And I would say, "Look at my research. It's all co-written." And I still love that. Being part of this, "What should we do about this? Well, I don't know, let's try this!" You know, that still is very appealing to me. And so, I was really lucky to be able to make that change, because Georgia State University's in the same city in Atlanta. I didn't even have to move. Still there's bumps in the road. You know, I remember there was a couple year period where I thought, “I can't get published for anything.” I mean, my manuscripts—The referee comments would basically say, "Seek career counseling." [laughs] I exaggerate. But I mean, it was brutal! And then things started kind of rolling along again. So, good times and bad times, right?

JK: Can you talk a little bit about your research interests during your time as a [faculty member]—before you moved into administration? What were your research interests? What kinds of projects did you work on?

MW: Well, I appreciate you asking that. And really, the good and the bad of my work is I'm interested in so many different things. And so, I could be talking with you—you and I could be talking about, something, some idea. And I could say, “Well, you know, there's some data that we could get.” And before long you and I would be writing a paper together, and I would be doing this statistical work. And so, I ended up working in two or three different areas, and they're all of interest to me. But the best way to sum it up, I think, would be to say that I'm very interested in knowing whether policies work. I'm very interested in asking the question, "Can we find evidence to support this change in policy at the K 12 area, or this change in tax policy that affects married couples?" Does it have the effect we anticipated? When you think of it that way, everything's much more tied together. Because I'm always interested in that evidence, which is actually a

perfect segue into the work that so many universities are doing on student success. Because we want to know. I mean, if we're going to really fund this new initiative, this new program, then let's be sure that we evaluate it and analyze it to see whether it actually has the impact we're looking for. And so, a good example, an easy example, from my published work is a paper I wrote with Mark Anderson about the four-day school week. And so, he had found that all these kind of rural school districts were going to four-day weeks. And we're like, Oh god, that's got to have [a bad effect].. We didn't have the best data in the world. But we got data to see if it was affecting these students, like fifth grade students' academic progress. And we found out that it was not having a bad effect. I mean, none of the schools did this to help student learning. They did it to save money. But the obvious question is, Well, what other impact is it having? Now, better data and better evidence has turned over our results a little bit. But that was a good example of a paper that was really interesting to me.

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JK: Yeah, I can see how that links. So, you have a very wide variety of publications on a very wide variety of topics. But I see now how your methodology and then this broader question of policy effectiveness drove each of those.

MW: Right, right. And so, a couple of special projects I'm doing now is more of the same. I'm not writing for publication now. Although, if you've got any good ideas, let's talk. But that because it's the same thing, looking at data, trying to find the data that'll show us this or that.

JK: Anything else you want to add? Because you were at Georgia State for a substantial amount of time before moving into administration. So is there anything else you wanted to add about your experience as a faculty member? And then we can transition to talking about how you entered into administration and what that experience was like?

MW: Well, I'll tell you I just had some wonderful colleagues over the years that have just done remarkable work. And I've been fortunate. I've not talked about teaching, but I did really like being in the classroom and liked working with PhD students a lot. And my favorite class to teach, probably, was in a master's level econometrics course. And so, I sometimes feel like I've made an impact on a lot of people, helping them get started and doing their own applied work. And so that really was part of the experience. You know, the other thing I would say is, and this I think would be surprising, but I never saw myself doing administration. Never.

JK: Well, that is a good segue into the next question. So, if you did not envision that, how did you enter into administration?

MW: Well, I got asked to do one semester, temporary, as the Associate Dean in the College in the policy school. And then from that, which I really saw as a temporary gig, [because] we were recruiting a new dean at the time, et cetera. This is not a long-term thing. But then it turned out, I needed to be department chair. And that's a whole other story. But there was the need. And so, I thought, I'm pretty good at this, you know? I'm doing a pretty good job here. And then there

was some upheaval, and I got nominated to be the next dean. And the process went on for a while. And this is literally true. I would wake up in the night and think, Oh, please don't pick me! Please don't pick me! And then in the morning I'd say, “Well, I'll give this a try!” Well, I became Dean, and was very fortunate to work with a president and a provost who helped me and pushed me and rewarded me. And I really saw that that's where I can make the most difference. I mean, it was just clear, I mean, I cared about the faculty. I cared about the students and the institution. And it was clear that my particular talents lay in that area. And so that really kind of sold me on administration. And I learned a lot in the last couple years. I'll tell you that. But that's what really made the difference. I mean, I would have been chair, I would have done my time as chair and gone. I liked it, but I wouldn't probably have thought about it except for the opportunity.

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JK: Any initiatives or projects that you feel particularly proud of from the administrative time you had at Georgia state?

MW: Well, we had the opportunity. I mean, you remember the great recession, and, oh my stars! Budgets were bad. Higher-ed [education] budgets were bad. But we had the opportunity to build a school through the special hires that were interdisciplinary. My college was successful at that. I really promoted that. And we had a several centers, applied research and research centers in the college. And [that] I really was proud of, and I can't take credit for this, but I did promote and help where I could. The Health Policy Center just really does remarkable work. And I helped them grow and change, which mostly involves staying out of their way. You know, it, and they just do really, really important work. Now across the country, it started more state orientation. But now it's more national.

JK: Your state, the title is Health Policy Center?

MW: Yeah. The Georgia Health Policy Center, it's called. I mean, there are others doing excellent work, too. But they're the ones that stepped up. I mean, they went from doing about—I don't remember exactly, maybe like $8 million of externally funded grants and contracts a year to doing like $18 million while I was dean, you know? They were just doing such important work. When the Affordable Care Act came out, they did all this analysis, so that small companies, large companies, [and the] public would understand. What does that mean to us? Think about how valuable that work is. So, that's an example.

JK: Absolutely! And in line with your own research interests, it sounds.

MW: But in the college as a whole, there were lots and lots of people who were focused in that direction. I also brought in both the School of Social Work and the Department of Criminal Justice Criminology into the Andrew Young School. And that was a solid fit. And so, I think that that made a difference on the trajectory of the college as well.

JK: And you held two more additional administrative positions before coming to Northridge, right?

MW: Yes, I've been dean for seven years. And I talked to my boss, the provost, and my mentor. And she said, "If you think you want to move into a higher-level position, you need some university-wide experience, instead of just being in college focus." And so, I applied for this. We didn't call them AVPs [Associate Vice Presidents]. There wasn't a vice provost. But I applied for Associate Provost for Strategic Initiatives. And I really did learn a huge amount. And I loved that that was great. Got to do some fascinating stuff. And so, I did that for a couple years. But I mean, I knew that I was going to be applying, for other positions, eventually. And then, one day, the last thing I expected to be was an interim president, but the President of Georgia State walked into my office and closed the door and I thought, "Oh, he's going to fire me!" [laughs] But he asked me if I would be interested in serving as an interim president. And I said, well, I mean, one is not going to say no. So, the chancellor of the system asked me to go and be an interim president. They were doing the search, but the current president wanted to leave earlier rather than later. And it was fast, you know? I think I had that conversation with President Becker on like Tuesday. On Thursday, I interviewed with the chancellor. And on Monday, I was sitting in that president's office, and that was at a completely different kind of institution. They hired a great permanent president. And that was an interesting experience too.

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JK: And then at that point, you come to Northridge. What interested you in CSUN and in the position at CSUN?

MW: Well, I had decided that I was going to see if there was a provost position that I was interested in. And if I got that, I would take that job. My husband was getting ready to retire from his position. And if I didn't, I was just going to retreat to faculty and live my life as an economics professor. And so, I think there were like four or five positions that were of interest. I wanted to be in a big city. No more small towns, for me. I didn't want to be where it snowed all the time. I lived in the South too long. And I wanted to be in a place where the students were diverse, where there were a lot of first gen [generation]. You know, at Georgia State University all the time I was dean, it's when Georgia State was making all those advances in student success. So, in the college, we implemented a lot of those strategies that are so important for student success. I wanted to be in a place that also cared very much about advancing student success. And of course, the GI 2025. And so, the university, the diversity of the students, the interesting things going on in the research area, [were what] I looked at to see what people were doing. And I mean, LA! That's kind of a cool place. And so, that ticked all the boxes. That's definitely why I was interested and why I came.

JK: And you mentioned this because you had worked on it at Georgia State. But you come to Northridge, and the CSU system as a whole has this graduation initiative, as you mentioned. So can you talk about your work in that area? How you really initiated projects to support graduation rates and student success, and very effectively, in Northridge.

MW: Well, I was lucky enough to work with some very talented individuals. And we wanted to do several things. One of the first things, really, was the importance of communicating what does student success mean, and what does it not mean. There's a lot of misunderstanding and myths about—people that don't like this idea of student success. It's Oh, you're trying to make all the students be exactly the same! No, no, not at all! You know? We want to give students the opportunity. If they want to proceed, and most students come in saying, “I want to get my degree in four years and get a good job.” And we wanted to make sure they had the opportunity to do that. So, the initiatives that really matter—and I talked about this on campus and tried to help people understand what we were measuring and what we weren't measuring, and what the role is. I mean, because it's clearly—the bulk of it, the big majority of the work on student success is in the classroom, you know? And there's a lot of things that you can do around that, that matter. Like advising. Really good proactive advising. And we started pushing that, but the pandemic kind of got in my way. But we started pushing that forward, talking about advising and there was some pushback. So again, we're explaining and communicating about it and trying to get enough advisors so that students are actually able to find one when they need one. And so, Provost Komarraju has picked that up where we left off and has pushed it on to the next step. All kudos to her. So, it was an initiative I got very interested in, [and] I wanted to see us do something in that area of meta-majors. And I won't bore you with telling you all about that. Elizabeth Adams, she's no longer at CSUN, was starting to try to put things into place to be able to do that. You know, you can't do everything at once. This is all just too much. But [that was] where we started. And of course, I hired Melanie Bocanegra as the AVP of Student Success. And she immediately started saying, we need to be looking at disaggregated data, we need to be taking the data we have. We can't really understand what's going on. And then changing that whole culture about looking at our data and understanding it. Dr. Janet Oh has been really instrumental in helping that advance to the next level. So, if you look at the communication about what does it mean. If you look at the evidence and the data, and that hard work on advisors. Those are some of the important things. It takes a long time for these things to bear fruit, but they're moving forward.

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JK: Just because you've described your own research interests and expertise, how did you bring that to bear on student success and kind of using data to inform programs and policies? And then also to assess [if] the policies effective?

MW: Well, I mean, you're asking exactly the right question. And in some areas, we had not really been doing that. And so, you have to build the ability to do it. Like, what data do we need? And so, there's a lot of examples of where this happens everywhere, you know? Something that you think is going to be a pretty good idea. But, if students A), don't want to do it or B)sometimes the results just don't show up like you think they will. And just talking about, Well, let's find out how many students really are changing majors. Because in a lot of where I came from, that would slow down so many students’ progress because they would be hopping majors. So, we were looking at that. We were looking at what are the barriers to progression. And some of them come up in ways you just can't even fathom. And nobody can even remember why that policy

was put in place sometimes. And so, just trying to uncover and ask questions about that. One of the issues—it's an issue in every university and there's no good, perfect solution to it, but we were really trying to look at the impact of these different interventions in the early math classes that our students take. And so, we did some experimental stuff. You know, in some areas, things have worked. I mean, you got to try, right? And many of the math faculty are so interested in this. You know, they want to see a change. This is an issue at every university. There's no perfect solution, believe me! You know, we would know if [there] was.

JK: So we're still dealing with the global COVID-19 pandemic, and I think you had the challenging job of helping to lead a university during some of the most difficult years that most of us can remember. So, can you talk about how the pandemic impacted the CSUN community and how your work as provost evolved to address those challenges of the pandemic?

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MW: Well, everything else got pushed off the table. We had to deal. And the hard thing to deal with, the hardest thing, was nobody really knew much, right? We didn't know how bad it was. We didn't know how it spread. We didn't know. And the decision to close the university, I mean that got made in like a week's time. You know, the vice presidents and then President Harrison, and we were all talking about it. What are our alternatives? And we realized it—just think how bad. Usually universities do everything so slowly, right? We had to do that so quickly. And students—the communication with students, and the communication with faculty and staff. I mean, this was brutal. And so, [it was about] making the decision, and then communicating the decision. I'll tell you, faculty development, and IT jumped in there and started trying to provide learning experiences so that faculty could learn how to teach [online]. We had to get technology in so many students' hands, and in some faculty's hands as well. There were tons of faculty who, their laptop, or their computer that they used at home, didn't have a camera! That's going to be hard, to teach a class on Zoom! And so just all the deans, I mean, we were just—in real time—uncovering problems, and trying to make the right decisions and trying to help everybody. The impact [on] faculty and staff were like, “What’s going on?" And it's so interesting, because there were so many faculty before this, [saying] "I will not teach online! I'm not going to be teaching an online course!" And then, you're thrown in the deep end of the pool, and you're struggling to manage, and then a lot of faculty [were saying], "You know, this is working out pretty well!" And, one of my jobs, really critically important jobs as provost is to read promotion and tenure files. And I read hundreds of these. You know, I took that very, very seriously. And I remember that very first year, and you'd read the students were [confused]. At first, nobody knew what was going on. [The students] couldn't figure [it] out—"My professor didn't know, we didn't know." And then they were mostly so kind. About within a couple of weeks, "My professor had gotten this figured out and had reached out to me individually," and I was so touched by that, because they were struggling, the students were struggling. I mean, I think we had to close the residence halls. So, the students were struggling, and they still took the time to, in so many cases, comment on how much they appreciated the work that their faculty members were doing. And so then we just leapt from one thing right to the other. So, all the research labs got closed. The researchers [were] going, "Ah! We can't close [the lab]!" We were struggling to figure out the

right protocols to call, and I don't know if you remember this, but LA County Public Health had these odd—to my mind, hard to interpret rules about [how] you can only do stuff on campus, if it's—I don't remember what the word they use, but if there's no other way to do it. And so then on campus, we're trying to figure out what does that mean, you know? What about this engineering lab? What about this bio lab? And struggling to make all those decisions. What about the arts? What about the sculpture studio? And of course, then it just kind of from that first frantic end [to] that spring semester in [2020]. And then we started saying, "Well, we can do more stuff on campus. How are we [going to…?]"—Again, communication! You know, and making it safe, and talking to all the people who are worried about that. Getting all those protocols. So, yeah, it was hard on everybody, you know? And this is true, there was always someone unhappy about a decision. Always. In every case. You know, the fact that LA County—it was essential, only essential. So, you couldn't do an art class. You could only do art history. You could do it on Zoom, etc. But you couldn't have people together in an art studio. You know, we asked! I asked for so many exceptions. "No, no, no." They would not give any exceptions to all these different things. So, there were always people, sometimes it was students, sometimes it was parents that were saying, "You know, such-and-such-a-college has everybody back on campus! What was the matter with you people?" You know? And sometimes it was the students going, "I don't want to come to campus for, Chem [chemistry] 201." And so, it was a rough, rough period.

[00:50:28]

JK: And at the same time, almost concurrently, we have the murder of George Floyd. And then nationwide protests. A real moment of reckoning in the United States around issues of racial inequality. So, one of the initiatives that you created in response is this DEI fund to support projects on campus. Can you talk about your vision for that initiative, and then what kinds of things you saw grow out of it with the support of that funding?

MW: Well, I appreciate you asking that. It was a cabinet decision to create that. And I said, I've got in Academic Affairs, one [opportunity]—I couldn't swear that I would have that every year. But I'd said “I can jumpstart this with one-time money”. Because nobody was traveling, remember? So, all the expenditures that go into conferences, et cetera. There were savings on that. So, on a one-time basis—I said, “We have enough money”. But the cabinet jumped all over this. They liked it. They liked this idea. The President's Commission on Race and Inclusion vetted the proposals. So, we struggled to come up with a proposal template, et cetera. But there was a mix of things where they ask for to create a program that would be continually funded. And then, one-time projects. So, there were some interesting, I think, murals. There was a proposal for that. There was a proposal to help—and I think this is ongoing, and now I'm not going to remember the right thing to call it—but it was joint with the College of Education and ethnic studies departments to help pay 12 teachers [to] teach ethnic studies and be brought into this conversation. And that was a very cool idea that I think is continuing. I don't know where it is right now. So, there were a mix of different things. I mean, I would read some of these proposals. The first year I read a lot of them. And, I just couldn't believe the creativity in some of them. And so, our faculty, our students, and our staff, because proposals come from everybody.

Really a lot of great ideas. And I'm glad to see that [it was able to be continued] into the future. And although, the more things you find on a permanent basis, the money gets kind of—. Nothing wrong with that, [because] you're doing good stuff. So—

JK: Are there any other challenges that you felt like you faced or had to deal with during your time as provost? I mean, we're just talking about two really big and significant ones. But were there any others that you felt faced you or the campus?

MW: Well, they all went together. But when the pandemic first started, the budget just fell in a deep hole. I remember being at a system meeting and a budget analyst, a state budget analyst came and talked to us at the system-level, and said, "We've never seen anything like this before." [laughs] And so, I'm like, No, that was kind of startling. And of course, we didn't know there was going to be the stimulus money, the HEERF money [Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds], the federal government money. We had no idea about that. And so, trying to figure out how we were going to pull back our expenditures. I mean, you want to talk about something that makes everybody unhappy, including me? It's big budget cuts like that. And so that was a real struggle. The deans really stepped up. And everybody did everything they could. And we reduced expenditures in every area. And then the stimulus money, which is not permanent money, but it came along and really softened the blow. So, we could use that. One of the big challenges was when we started really being able to offer in-person classes. I thought at one point I was going to have to go knock on faculty's door. And personally escort them back to campus because so many people were going, Oh, it's too early! Or some people were going, Hurray! I mean, there was just a whole mix. And Dr. Matt Cahn, who was the Vice Provost at the time, did a series of workshops with faculty returning to campus. And he did week after week after week, and [met with] the faculty to answer their questions, talk about the protocols, explain the systems and stuff like that. I mean, that was a big project.

[00:56:00]

JK: In addition to some of the initiatives that we've already discussed, what would you identify as some of your biggest successes and achievements during your time as the provost?

MW: Well, I think I did change the conversation on student success. I changed that—away, I think, from something that had people like, What is that? You know, We're not interested in that. Which is not to say the faculty didn't care deeply about their students. That was different. And I think I did shine a light on the excellent research that's going on. When I was leaving, some faculty wrote comments, and a couple of people, the very well-funded researchers, expressed their appreciation. They said, "You really got it." And they didn't feel—I mean, nobody ever feels like they've had enough resources. But they felt like I understood. And then I think, the roadmap! You know, my last semester, the last year I was there, but it was really the spring semester of '22. And then by the fall of '22, we were done and we were doing implementation. But really getting people talking about their vision for the road ahead for CSUN. And I'm so glad President Beck asked me to do that. Oh my gosh, that was a challenge! But I'm really proud of the work that so many people did on that. I think that that is a good marker for where to go—where we collectively think we ought to go! And so, I would say I would put that on that list.

JK: Which is actually the perfect lead into my next question, which are, what are your hopes for the University moving forward? Which I'm sure were shaped by the process of doing that roadmap.

MW: Well, I love the University, there's no question about it. Just wonderful people. I used to get to meet with student leadership, like once a month. Oh, that was the highlight of my week, when I met with student leadership, so wonderful. So, I hope that we keep referring to the roadmap. And that we do really embrace [the attitude of saying], "Well, let's look at the evidence on this!" And if we don't like the way [the evidence] is looking, [then] let's think of something else to do! You know, and really be able. Universities are not good at stopping doing anything. But once in a while, you'd say, “Well, this way of—just randomly—this way of setting up a tutoring lab, this isn't working as well. Let's try this!” Now that's really good and healthy. And so, I hope that the emphasis in the roadmap about, Let's assess where we are! How do we know if we're doing what we want to do if we don't assess? I hope that really takes hold.

JK: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

MW: Well, I would say that, now on I've retreated to faculty. I work half-time and I will say I have a little more life/work balance now than I did when I was provost. But I really also miss some of the great people that I would just regularly meet with, that now I don't have that same opportunity. So—

JK: Let me go ahead and stop our recording. Thank you so much for this interview.

[01:00:03]

[End of interview]