

Oral History Transcript

CSUN Leaders

Interviewee William Watkins = WW

Interviewed by Jessica Kim = JK

Interview conducted on Sep 7, 2022 via remote video conferencing technology

Transcribed by Albert Dubin

Total Time: 01:12:49

JK: Okay, today is Monday, August 22. This is Jessica Kim. I'm in Los Angeles, California, and on a Zoom call with Dr. William Watkins, Vice President for Student Affairs of California State University Northridge. We're about to begin recording his oral history. This interview will become part of the campus leadership oral history project. Dr. Watkins has served as vice president for Student Affairs and dean of students at California State University since 2010. In this role, he oversees the Klotz Student Health Center, university counseling services, student outreach and recruitment services, disabilities resources, and educational services, financial aid and scholarship, the National Center on Deafness, the Career Center, and student housing and conference services. He also provides oversight of the University Student Union and the Associated Students. Dr. Watkins began his educational and professional career at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). He earned his bachelor's degree in Urban Studies in 1974, and began his work with the campus as a work study student during his undergraduate studies. As an undergraduate at CSUN he became the first African American to be elected to the position of student body president, and he received the university's Outstanding Graduating Senior Award. He went on to earn a master's degree in public administration from the University of Southern California and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of California, Los Angeles. From his years as an undergraduate Vice President Watkins had dedicated his career to CSUN. He received his first full time staff appointment in Human Resources after finishing his bachelor's degree. He advanced in that department, eventually becoming associate director for personnel and employee relations. He then joined the leadership team of the Division of Student Affairs in 1993, then became assistant vice president for student life in 1994. He went on to serve as associate vice president for student affairs beginning in 2004, then served as acting vice president beginning in 2009, and moved into his current position as vice president for student affairs and dean of students in 2010. So it's an honor to be with you today, Vice President Watkins, and to have you tell your story and share your insights.

WW: Thank you. I have a chance to talk with you about the journey [laughs].

JK: We'll start at the very beginning. And I'd like you to talk about when and where you were born.

WW: Oh, when? Oh, you even want that piece too [laughs]. I was born in 1952. And born in Memphis, Tennessee. I came to California. I think I was about three or so when we migrated from down south to Los Angeles.

JK: And what brought your parents or your family to Southern California?

WW: You know, as part of the migration that was happening out of the south at that point, in time, still. It had started before that period of time we had my mother's aunt had actually moved from St. Louis. So she had moved from Louisiana to Lake Providence, Louisiana, to St. Louis, married there. And her and her family--this is my aunt I'm speaking about--moved to Los Angeles. And then at a point in time, when my mom and dad decided that they wanted to relocate for opportunity, they decided to come to Los Angeles, and we stayed with my mom's aunt at that point.

JK: And can you talk more about your early experiences in Southern California and then as well as your parents and family background?

[00:03:26]

WW: Yeah. Well, you know, my mother and father were both from small towns, if you will, in the states. My mother was born in a place called Lake Providence, Louisiana, which is at the northern tip of it. And my father was born in a place called Stanton, Tennessee. Both of them in rural areas where their families did share-cropping work. They met in Memphis, Tennessee. My father, moved from Stanton to Memphis, where his mother had already left the country, if you will, and moved to Memphis and so he joined her there. And my mother was there and staying with her aunt, at the time. Aunts play a big role in my life, I guess. [This is just] emerging in my thinking here. And they happen to be, as I understand it, [they] happened to both land with their families, joining families that lived on the same block and somehow, they met. And at some point, and I'm not sure how long they might have known each other and decided to get married before raising a family. My mother had a high school education. My mother was the child of a minister, a pastor in the country and she would often describe how she was from a family of nine children, I believe. How her father would put them all in a buggy and they would go around from little encampment to little encampment in the rural area of Louisiana. And he would deliver a message and they would sing, his children and, whatever community would feed them and they would go on to the next one. But really a pretty rural life but clearly some yearnings about college-going. My mother actually, I

think had one or two years of college going in. At that point in time colleges really were not as that we might think of them now. But I don't know a whole lot about this. What I'm told is she attended a college named Carroll College, which doesn't exist now. I tried to find it. But it was a small black college, that appears to have been a training environment for school teachers and nurses. That kind of thing. So she went to school there a couple of years, and then at some point, stopped going back because she probably met my dad and then got married and that ended that particular piece. My mother never had a career, so to speak. She was a homemaker throughout, although for most of my primary and secondary education, she did what we call day's work as I remember her getting up early in the morning and getting on a bus and going and traveling often out here to the San Fernando Valley, when we were living in LA to clean homes and do domestic work. She was a domestic worker. My father, again, he came up on a farm. When he came to Memphis, I think he worked in a textile industry there, making and refinishing fabrics. This was, I think, probably during some military conflict, Korean War or something, and didn't go into the service. You know, black folk were not being brought in in large numbers at that point in time. But worked at also the army depo, which was kind of [a] commissary there. But while he was working at the textile industry, he suffered an injury to one of his fingers. I can remember he always had a stubbed or nubbed finger--which one of his fingers, I'm not remembering--that he incurred as part of an accident there. I don't know why that just comes out to my mind. But in any event, they decided at some point to relocate the family. And the family consisted of one older sister of mine, and one younger. So I'm a middle child. So you can associate whatever--a life of negotiating, I'm very familiar with it. So my dad came out of by train, and then at some point in time sent for the family. And then we came out to Los Angeles, lived in very, very modest circumstances, particularly as they were trying to find some form of employment. My dad, his stable employment eventually was working as a laborer for the Department of Street Maintenance for the city of Los Angeles. My dad only had a seventh-grade education, something that was always a source of hurt and harm and dissatisfaction on his part, that he didn't have much more of an opportunity. And he had a tremendous amount of wisdom, but recognized that reading was difficult for him. It was, I think, a source of some embarrassment for him that he couldn't operate more at that particular level. It hindered him, on occasion, as he would try to take examinations to get promotions on his job and et cetera. You know, as a consequence of, you know, my mom having had some sensibilities about going on beyond high school and my dad not having even a high school education. Education was always very important to them. And so that's, you know, much of this is coming to me as I'm sharing it with you. But it was never a question about whether or not we were going to go to school and work hard at it and certainly complete at least through high school. My older sister was the first, of course, to graduate. When she graduated, she went to a community college: East LA [Los Angeles] Community College and

transferred from there to Cal State LA. I think she got her bachelor's degree before I did. But she was certainly the first to go to college. So I certainly had that as kind of an image of a pathway for me. My younger sister also went to Cal State LA. Coming up in South Central LA, which is where we lived, Cal State LA was the state school that was the closest. Dominguez Hills was also a possibility, but it had just emerged as an institution and Cal State LA was very well established. There was a time when Cal State LA was the university beyond UCLA for the area. And so I journeyed in a different direction and came out here to then what was San Fernando Valley State College.

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JK: This is related to these memories and experiences, but maybe even before you get to Northridge, what were your early experiences with education? So clearly, it was something that was really a priority for your parents, but was reinforced at home. What were your own experiences prior to getting to college?

WW: Very positive. The part of South Central LA I came up in was heavily Japanese, Chinese, Black, very little Latinx community members, some white folk were still transitioning out of the area. I went to LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District] schools, all of which were pretty serious about academics and expectations of students. There wasn't a whole lot of delinquency. I mean, you know, at the point in time when I was in grade school, education was highly coveted in the Black community. In many ways, the yearnings about education that you see in the Latinx community, I think this is true of all emerging cultures, that parents see education as the way out, if you will, or the way up, it should probably be better stated. And so, there was no question but that you needed to take it seriously, do your homework and do whatever. I went to elementary school that was then named Santa Barbara Avenue Elementary School. It is now named Martin Luther King Elementary School. And, gosh, I can remember the teachers that I had. Many of them--this was up through middle school--were in several instances, Black teachers, who had come from back east or down south themselves, and often saw themselves as having a particular duty and obligation to educate Black kids. And they themselves had come through some pretty challenging standards and rigor. And so, you know, they weren't having it [laughs]. You know, if you were not on doing what you were supposed to do--and I wasn't at school where they were majority by any stretch, but I had the blessing of having a couple along the way who knew that if I was not doing what I needed to do, it would not take great effort on their part at all to call my parents. And that foolishness would be over. I started when I was in probably the first, ... second grade. There was a time during which almost every kid in elementary school got an instrument and had to play in some orchestra or something. And so [there] wasn't a whole lot of choosing and teacher just walked around and just gave you one. I'd luckily

didn't get a violin; I got a trumpet. So that was more to my liking. But I make that point because there was a point in time when the schools had some really challenging standards. I mean, it wasn't as if they at the elementary school level were envisioning college-going. I mean, nobody was talking about that. It was completing a high school education and being prepared to take that on. By virtue of being in music all of my life from probably the second grade up until I graduated from high school, I always found math to be, I won't say easy, but it was not intimidating at all. So early on, I developed an idea that I wanted to be a mathematician. I didn't know what the heck that really meant, but math was a significant challenge and something I took enjoyment out of. And so most of my primary and secondary education was always in math, which kept me in a certain--there's a lot of homework, and there's a lot of--You got to be willing to speak up about what you don't know. Tons of testing, you know, forever. So, I mean, my educational experiences were very effective, I thought, in preparing me for college-going. When I graduated from high school, I was--so back in those days, you go from elementary school, to then what they called junior high school, subsequently became middle school. And when coming from elementary school to junior high school, our family relocated from the area where my aunt lived to an area that was a little bit better off not markedly in any kind of way. And it occasioned a change from one junior high school to another. This was probably in the eighth grade. And so, the experience of joining the school and making connections, and I stayed with the music program there. Stayed with the math there. I became engaged in clubs and organizations. And in the eighth grade, was probably the first time I was elected for student council. And so I stayed in student council all the way from [laughs] the eighth grade through the 12th grade. And then come here to Cal State Northridge and didn't run for office as a freshman, but yet from a sophomore on to... so you know, my life has been kind of pretty regimented with a certain menu of things that I was engaged in. But yeah, so I went from that middle school, Horace Mann Junior High, I should say, to Washington High School, which is the high school from which I graduated. And there again, you know, very involved in music programs, very involved in Student Council, student government. Very involved in service to the school. It was interesting, I was looking the other day, I was voted in high school, the person who had done the most for the school, and the person who was most likely to succeed. And so, I don't know what that's all about. But I've always had a sense of real connectivity with whatever learning space I'm in, as my community. And so, you know, educational institutions, including, of course, most notably Cal State, Northridge, have been my family. So, it's the school family and my biological family. And then the other family that's important to me, is my religious community family. Those are kind of my three worlds in which I travel. But my educational experiences, when I graduated from high school, it was during the Black Power Movement. And so I was fully exposed to that from the Civil Rights Movement and all that that was about through the Black Power movement. And was one of those

black homes that was the family sitting around the table and trying to figure out which way forward for the Black community. You know, parents who came up in very humble beginnings that were not very advocating, basically trying to work it out in whatever system, the system laid for them. But of course, having to manage kids who, in the 60s, were part of demonstrations, and cities burning, and all manner of things that reflected the emergence of, again, of the Black consciousness that spoke to me in terms of, I wanted to know about that. I wanted to speak out and engage around that. And so, when I came here to San Fernando Valley State College, when I got to CSUN in 1970-- this of course, was after '68 and '69, when this campus was ablaze, literally, and very engaged in a black power struggle in the creation, expansion of EOP, and creation of the Black Studies department and et cetera. And so, you know, I knew that I was a part of a generation that was speaking a new truth. Much like this generation is speaking, coming out of George Floyd, to the nation. And so it's one of the things that had brought a level of kinship between me and students over the years that I understand movements, because I understand and can recall that experience. And for me, irrespective of how novel a student's movement might be, because over the years that I've been here, certainly worked with students who thought they were creating something brand new. And I'm always there to make them think that because it's important that they do. But oh, let's see, we did that back in whatever. So, getting far afield here, but, you know, clearly, I have had an enriched experience with education. I have been in the space where I have pushed on it, tried to create space for education to do more effectively, what I think it can do for all communities. And you know, along the way, when I came here as a first-time freshman to CSUN, I actually majored in music. And if you know anything about that major, it's just loaded with a ton of one-unit classes and you're always thinking some one unit, voice or performance or blah-blah-blah-blah. And, in 1970, it was always kind of weird to be a voice major. You know, we typically have the acapella choir at noontime. And so, you're primarily singing in a foreign language, one that you really can't speak, but you learn how to say those words. So, you have that going on. But outside students are demonstrating. And it was just an interesting juxtaposition and tension for me in my life in terms of just which way I wanted to go. But the reason I left music as a major, you might imagine was not among many Black students certainly in the voice program, I think there were three of us there. And the voice part was fine, other than the fact that there was no genre of music that had anything to do with me and my history that we sang. But it was really music theory, which is, you know, you have to take several years of that. And so, despite the fact that I had been in music for a very, very long period of time, I have not had a single class ever in my whole life that had to do with the theory of music, and how you write music, in a very formulaic way, and the history behind them, and then major writers and composers and stuff. So as a first time, freshman, you know, I had probably something like seven classes, which is just an amazing number, we would not do that any

freshman here. But several of them were these were one-year classes. Of course you had to take them. And I had this three-unit theory class that I failed. The only "F" I had my entire career here. And so that semester, I had almost all "A's", I think a couple of "B's" and an "F". And it was pretty devastating, quite frankly, you know, and it's the way we are as human beings, you can be doing great and these other things, but it's that one failure. So, you couldn't continue to progress, you have to actually complete that course. So, I had an advisor. Daniel Kessner was his name. He's now retired. A faculty member who probably saved my life academically here, because we were able to talk and he was able to say, you may love music, but it may or may not be the case that the way in which this music program is structured, will be in alignment with your success. And I didn't take it as someone who was trying to counsel me out of a major that didn't have much diversity. It actually sounded like he cared about it. And that he had a bigger vision of getting a degree but being very transparent about that department. Many years after I had gotten my bachelor's degree in a different field, you know, and it's always fun when you graduate from the university and then you work at that university and somewhere down the road and your former teachers are now your colleagues, and you talk about things. And he shared with me, he says, "Well, I didn't tell you back then," he says, "but your music theory teacher was a horrible faculty member who the next year, we terminated. That lifted me to know that that was not really all about me, because I'm a hard worker, you know, and, but that was just a faculty member who just didn't have the time of day. So, you know, I switched majors. And fortunately for me, I did so after one year, and so I was able to have a second major, and still completed my degree in four years. And a part of that is nobody ever told me I could be here for longer than four years. I mean, I came here back in the old days, when it was a four-year college degree. I figured I had to take enough units every semester to make that happen. And so, I did. So, there was some semesters where I had 16 units, or 17 units or whatever. And then before my senior year, I took some school classes, just to make sure I stayed on track. But the educational journey--so I've always believed in what we can do here at Northridge, I have had the awareness in the evidence that there is much more for us to do. And part of, sadly, part of the reason we haven't done better in my view, academically over the years here at Northridge is the fact that we have always been so over enrolled, that faculty have not seen it in their own personal economic interest to make sure that they are delivering an experience that causes students to go out and say great things and recruit other students. They've always had the convenience of knowing that there's always going to be an abundance of students that fall. Well, this fall, that will be history that will show the second year in some decline. So anyway, I don't know if those are touching on the kinds of things you were thinking about there.

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JK: You are. You are. I think that's a really powerful story about the impact that mentorship, very effective mentorship can have on a student. So after you decided that music was not the right fit, where did you go? And what kinds of career aspirations did you have as you were finishing up your degree?

WW: Yeah. So, when I decided that I was going to permit myself to not major in American music--and as a footnote, my family was not super glad that I was majoring in music. My dad who's, you know, working in the hot street filling potholes. And while he was happy that I was going to college, it wasn't his view that his son was going to go to college and major in music [He said] What the heck is that all about? You know, my loving dad was always encouraging of things. So, when I told him I changed majors, I saw smile, Oh, what's that all about? Oh, I like that field. So, when I decided that I was not going to stay with music, I did some pretty basic things that many students did some with some success and others not. Back in those days, you get the catalog, and you start reading through the thing. The expectations around advising that we have today are absolutely nothing like back—it was sink or swim back in the day. And those were back in the days when you go to orientation and they'd say Look to your left, look to the right, one of the three of us not going to be here next year. And would say that with pride. So, I got the catalog, I still got that catalog, started going through that thing, page by page and came upon a brand new major at the time called Urban Studies. And I was really captured by its promise to develop within students that capacity to understand cities and people who lived within them. And I developed this real interest in public spaces as living organisms, that if we think about how to use them and how we equip people to be in them, that we could all have a more prosperous life, a more fulfilling life. So Urban Studies, which subsequently became Urban Planning really appealed to me. And so I think I was a part of the second graduating class out of that major. So, imagine all new, upstart faculty members who are trying to create a new discipline of study and all of that kind of stuff and I benefited by all that energy there, and Dan Dagodag was my mentor back at that point in time. The way in which the major was structured, you could decide upon several different kinds of pathways in which you could be a part of social institutions. One who was being a part of the planning departments, which I thought I would go towards. But, you know, it became clear at that point in time that there was a depression that was happening in the early 70s. And many cities were laying off of all of their city planners. So, career wise, that was not going to be working out. But at the same time, I was beginning as a junior and senior, because I was in student government, to really pay attention to what is a university and really, how does this thing operate? When we think about cities, this campus is almost like a city. You know, [it] has its own health department. It has its own physical plant. It has its own police. It has its own library; it has its own parameters and boundaries and rules. And so, I began to use a higher education as kind of the city environment. And I began to think about students or

employees being a part more effectively, of college campus. And so, by my senior year, in my Pro Seminar class, which was taught by just a coveted faculty member, Warren Campbell, he said, So where do you want to take this? Where do you want to work, and have a career? And I told him, I said, you know, I think I want a career in higher education. And I told him why. And it's funny, because he's told that story--I had forgotten about it, but he's told this story publicly the same year-round, "He knew he wanted to be in higher education, now look at him. He's still in higher education, He's an administrator in higher education blah-blah-blah. But yeah, I mean, early on, I don't know what I thought about how we got faculty members. You know, maybe they were hatched, and came out of an egg somewhere. But, you know, we didn't talk to students back in those days about having a life as an academic, being an academic administrator, all of those--we didn't do that. But because I was involved in student government and as a councilman who once had lots of interactions with administrators, I was able to have a unique opportunity to pay attention to and look at universities and decide, well, I think I really want to be here. So, when I graduated here, I was fortunate I had gotten admitted to Master's in Public Administration at USC [University of Southern California]. In fact, there was a period during my senior year where I hadn't been admitted to any academic program, didn't have a job, didn't have anything. I'm thinking like, I've done all of this stuff here and I won't be able to go home and tell my parents I've done anything that equates to this paying off. But in a short period of time, several things came to play. One was getting admitted to USC, and then having the fortune of getting selected to be a Norman Topping Scholar at USC, which meant that I didn't even have to pay tuition. I didn't pay tuition until my last semester at USC. And then I got hired here at the university for a job in personnel, they called it then. We call it human resources now. And the job I applied for was a position that the campus made available for someone to coordinate a program that intended to bring welfare recipients onto the campus. These are unemployed welfare recipients onto the campus in various departments, give them training in various skill sets, and ultimately hire them here on our campus. And here again, was one of those opportunities to bring people into the college space for good. And I had remembered when I was student body president, you also chaired the AS Personnel Committee. And I took a personnel management class and so I'd begun to even think about personnel management as a part of a career set on the college campus. So, I got the job. It was a part time job paying all of \$356 per month. You know, I knew I wasn't rich, but [I] was going to be able to work with the scholarship to allow me to have employment, have an apartment and to pursue the master's degree.

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JK: And can you talk a little bit about your first experience, I know you have two graduate degrees. So maybe talk a bit about your first experience in graduate school at USC. And then I'm guessing that your career at CSUN was in parallel within your Ph. D, or your subsequent degree at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. So talk about those.

WW: Working on a Master's in Public Administration at USC was pretty good coming out of an undergraduate Urban Studies/Public Administration kind of program. It was just wonderful. The two top schools in public administration at that time were the Maxwell School at Syracuse, and then the MPA [Master of Public Administration] program at USC. And so I was really quite honored to be able to be selected, and I thoroughly loved graduate school. Because, you know, as I say to folk, when you choose to pursue a graduate degree, you actually made a decision to immerse yourself in what you believe to be the academic sphere of interest that you just want to hear tons about. And that's what happened at the graduate level. At the graduate level, your opinion matters. And in fact, if you don't have one, you're not going to do very well in some disciplines. And so this whole juxtaposition of relationship of faculty to student, where an undergraduate, the faculty member is the fountain of all knowledge. And your job is to tell them back what it is a told you, to going to graduate school where you're co-constructing and understanding. And where your own life experience can have value, and where you learn how to be able to defend it or speak to it in a way that expects critique? That spoke to me. I just loved, immensely, being in that space and having that experience. The only thing that I didn't enjoy so much at USC--You know, it's a very--I don't know, did you go to USC? I probably didn't ask that question.

JK: I did! [laughs]

WW: You did? I suddenly said, Hey, you better ask her that question! [laughs]

JK: [laughs]

WW: At an undergrad or grad or both?

JK: My PhD.

WW: Okay. Well, what was immediately apparent to me about USC, at least back then, is there was no middle class. You have students like myself, who came from not great economic means, but were able to put a set of things together that said, Hey, you know, you could probably do this here. And then the school finds a way financially to get you through that. And then you have everybody else who will walk up to the doggone

registration window and write these big fat checks and pay for it. I was blown away! You know, What? Bovard Auditorium or wherever we went and registered, and I'm thinking like, Wow, there are people who got it like that, you know? And in that same dynamic emerged in classes, unless faculty really occupied the space and tried to create an understanding of the voice that was not present. And so that was kind of a downside, but more effective faculty tried to bridge that because, you know, at that point in time, USC was not owning its presence as an urban center. It did subsequently. At that point in time, it was just very proud of itself as having been the place that educated all of the county board supervisors, folks [to] city council people. We make the city go, kind of thing. But, you know, obviously a very highly resourced institution. A place where the movers and shakers and thinkers in the discipline were present there. I was fully immersed in my professional trajectory here at that point in time. So I didn't spend any time whatsoever in campus life as a working on my Masters, so I was a night school student and had that kind of experience. The experience of pursuing the doctor degree, educational, EDD degree at UCLA came much, much later. And really, quite frankly, I went and worked on the doctorate degree because when I started working on it, I was already an Assistant Vice President for Student Life and could not stop people from calling me Dr. Watkins. I'd walk around all day, Well, you know, it's just not doctor. Oh, okay. But Dr. Watkins, right? You know, and then had a faculty member over in, then Ed Psych [Educational Psychology], he was in the career area, Greg Jackson--we lost him, unfortunately, to an untimely death. Greg was constantly in my ear, William, you need to go get your doctorate degree and blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. So anyway, I finally yielded, and went over and was able to be admitted to the educational leadership program, which was, at that point in time, I think, in only its fourth cohort over at UCLA, and had a pretty enriching and wonderful experience there as well.

[00:40:54]

JK: Let's go back to your career trajectory at CSUN. So you start in HR [Human Resources] personnel, and then kind of talk us through the steps that you take from there.

WW: Yeah. So I started there as a personnel assistant, coordinating this program, and then increasingly began to move out of that program to other more mainline personnel functions. And so the next position that I had was manager of employment. So that was being responsible for all non-faculty hiring on the campus. Then I moved from there to manager of employment and compensation, and then moved from there to associate director for personnel, in which I had some forms of training, classification and compensation. Employment functions there [that] I've dealt with: retention of probationary employees and those kinds of functions there. And it's kind of weird, because at that point in time, when I left HR work, and came into Student Affairs there

were two dynamics that were happening. One was we were, yet again, in the midst of economic travail and doing layoffs. And I knew we needed to reduce our headcount by one professional employee in personnel, but nobody came to me and said, Will, you need to do that. But what happened was the then Vice President for Student Affairs, Ron Kopita was his name, relatively new, came to me. He had been seeing me around campus, advising clubs and organizations. So while I was working in administration kinds of work, because I still had so much affinity for students in college life, I volunteered to advise several clubs and organizations, including the Black Business Association, was selected as advisor of the year, had a highly successful organization. And he came to me and he says, you know, What are you doing over there in administration? You should be in student affairs work. And here's this VP [Vice President] in my office and HR telling me I shouldn't be there. Have you ever thought about doing Student Affairs work? Well, quite frankly, I had, when I graduated, undergrad, I applied for a couple of positions, based in campuses, and did not get them. They were positions in Student Affairs work. And so that kind of--And I don't know, probably had I gotten those positions, I would have gone directly in the Student Affairs work as opposed to HR. But that's how it played itself. And so here he is making this overture, like, You should come to work for me. Tell me more about this. And so we kind of talked about what he had in mind. You know, and it did weigh on me that, you know, if I left, that might mean that another colleague didn't have to leave as a part of the professional team and in personnel. So I went home and talked to my wife about it, and my best buddy. And [she said] you're not going to do that. You know, because she knows I'd kind of lock in and I'd do my thing. But I don't know whether or not it was a challenge. But I know I was certainly motivated by the opportunity to do something positive for the team there in personnel and, quite frankly, for the opportunity to get closer to working for Blenda Wilson, who was our first black president here. And that notion, and idea just really appealed to me so I said, It's going to be a leap of faith. I got back to them and I said, Yeah. So we created the position of Assistant Vice President for Student Life. And its function was to pull together, then the University Student Union and Associated Students, and our Campus Activities departments, that kind of loosely work together. But were not really cohesively interwoven, so that our students can have, you know, a seamless experience in the co-curricular environment. And so I built that and built those units. And then I also did conduct work at that point in time dealing with student whose behavior needed to be addressed. And so that led from that Interim Assistant Vice President. I applied for the job, got in on a permanent basis. I then at some point in time, pick up international and exchange student programs. And then at some point in time pick up student housing as a part of my portfolio. By that time, I was Associate Vice President and Dean of Students and reporting then to the new Vice President for Student Affairs, Terry Piper--great mentor of mine. And sadly, Terry lost his life far too early. And President Joleen Kester came to me and asked me whether or

not I would step in and lead the division and then eventually asked whether or not I would take the position on permanently. And it was kind of weird, I'm sure she must wonder what was going through my head. So when she asked me that, I told her, I had to think about it. You know, and I did, because I knew what was going to happen. You know, when you become a vice president--You know, my life was absolutely rotating around, given towards the heartbeat of students and student life. And as you move up administratively, it doesn't surprise you to know that you have less and less direct interaction with students. And that was a hard one for me to swallow. So the deal I made with her was okay, I'll be Vice President for Student Affairs. But I'm going to keep the Dean of Students title. And so I'm probably one of maybe only two Vice Presidents for Student Affairs and Dean of Students in the CSU system. Because it really was important for me to continue to build into my portfolio, tasks and responsibilities that brought me close to students. And so yeah, so that was that journey.

JK: And actually, it's a great segue into my next question, which is just--you've been at CSUN for a long time and you've seen, given how closely you work directly with students how much they, you know, Northridge students, and then CSU students in general balance in their lives. So their studies of family responsibilities--I mean, many of my students are working full time. So can you talk a little bit about how your understanding of how students do all of this or about your understanding of how students do all of this? And then what role Student Affairs plays in supporting them? And maybe comment a bit too, on how that's changed over time. I think students have more responsibilities now than they did ten or twenty years ago?

WW: Yeah. Yeah. Well, they do it with great difficulty. I mean, this is the short answer. You know, and then certainly in a COVID [Coronavirus Disease 2019] environment? It has been all the more challenging. You know, our continuing student enrollment this coming fall, will fall off some and we're absolutely convinced that students who are having to continue to work and care for families and for whom coming back out to the valley and getting an apartment here and locking in on school as their only preoccupation is just not in cards. Now, students have struggled in different ways over time. When I came here, the struggle was whether or not you are going to be drafted and go to the Vietnam War. Okay? Or as a returning veteran, coming onto a college campus in the 60s, in the 70s, how would you be treated by fellow students who opposed the war? There have been periods during which, in my journey here, there have been great recessions, and where students have not been able to have you know--it's always been the case that students have to contribute in some way to their education, on going, but you know, when I started here, the tuition was \$153 per semester. Over this period of time, not only has it increased--now it hasn't increased in the last seven years and this administration has kept tuition--But there were periods during which students were

facing anywhere from seven to ten percent per year tuition increases, and just getting slammed. And these were days during which financial aid was not as plentiful. So my point is simply being that the life of a student acquiring an education and also being a human being with other family circumstances, or students in the CSU always has some level of churn and challenge around it. Our students, when they get financial aid, as you probably know, there's, you know, students will get a certain amount of financial aid, and then there's something called the expected family contribution. My experience is, typically, parents can't come up with that family contribution portion other than maybe the first year. Parents try to think it through to get the first year. And then the next year, kids are often on their own. And that contributes to the need for them to work a lot of hours. So I'm not surprised to hear your report about students working a great deal. So that's happening. And now we know more fully the circumstance of students as it relates to housing and food insecurity because under the former Chancellor White, he essentially launched this whole Basic Needs initiative that has gone across the nation right now. And in the distillation of all of that is that now colleges and universities are paying attention to and embracing as part of its responsibility, address something that has been with students forever. Students have been couch-surfing, and without stable living circumstances since I was an undergraduate. Students have been eating Top Ramen [and] all kinds of junk forever! But today, we have elevated that to a level of consciousness. So we are destigmatizing for our students, the fact that they can come forward, tell us about it. And actually, we will now spend funds to assist you in that. So again, I don't think there was ever a time for the CSU, maybe the University of California in its enrollment, but for the CSU, we have always served a more needy population that needed help and assistance to it. But I think it's more challenging for our students right now. The cost of everything is much, much higher. Books and you know, just on and on. So students have a number of things, but the cost of college going and the amount of loan debt that our students here at Cal State Northridge leave with is very, very miniscule juxtaposed to students on other campuses.

[00:52:47]

JK: I have some more specific questions about your work in Student Affairs? So I know part of your responsibilities include oversight of student discipline issues. So can you talk about your work in that area and what that's looked like over your career at CSUN?

WW: Yeah. And let me just say that relative to this thing about housing and food insecurity, so we now have a basic needs function. So I now have an administrator who does that. I have someone who deals with housing, and someone with food pantry and on and on. But the student conduct piece, which was one of the functions that I performed personally right when I came into Student Affairs, you know, it was often chided, Well,

why do you continue to do that? That's the thing that when people get into student affairs, that they want to immediately no longer do. But my heart has always wanted to occupy a space to deal with students who are exhibiting signs of difficulty in being effective students. And in my head and heart, students who are acting out are acting out typically for a reason. And, the behavior that is most reported on college campuses is, probably unsurprisingly, is academic dishonesty. And so early on in my career calling students in to talk to them about why it is that this occurred. Rarely was it the case that students didn't know right from wrong. They understood. Rarely was it that they didn't know the choices that could be made, inclusive of just taking a fail in the class. But it's really summoning the courage to do the right thing, which was really the work that I always tried to do with students so that they would leave this experience, never to repeat it again, and always choosing from a value set perspective, to do the right thing. Because for most of the kids that I've dealt with, the embarrassment that that behavior caused for their family was simply not worth it. And once you get students to recognize and say, you know, Your parents have cleaned toilets, your parents have done laundry for folk, your parents have done--whatever I could summons in that moment--for you to have this opportunity and now, you have to explain to them that you have failed because of values? And so I stayed in that space. And my administrator who's over [there] right now, Zeina Otaky Ramirez, has demonstrated that same ethic about student misconduct. It is an opportunity for us when students have disappointed us from our values, to put students back in touch with their values. Because generally students come here with the right values. But we do things, we create stakes for students, that cause them to believe that, you know, doing X and Y is worth more than my being the person that I am and living from my values. So it's about getting students to embrace that, honor that, and finding out, well, What happened for you to get behind? Typically, students fall behind. It's why they do these things, you know. If the student is acting out in a classroom, what's happening that you're almost causing the class to come to an end because you're going off on the faculty member? What's that all about? And so, we approach it from a student centered, student developmental perspective, as opposed to, well, how many kids did we kick out of school. Those are indices of our having failed.

[00:56:57]

JK: So a part of your work on campus, and you've mentioned this, has focused on the experiences of African American students, from the time that you were a student yourself.

WW: [laughs]

JK: Can you talk more about this topic and your decades of work to support Black students at Northridge?

WW: You know, I think it first began to emerge when I was a sophomore. At that point in time, I got tapped by one of our activities coordinators, and was told about something called the Black Pride program. It was a program that was developed over Cal State LA. And what that program did was it took undergraduate Black students, taught them Black history, because none of us had it in high school and you may or may not have gotten it on the college campus, and we took them through a training program to understand Black history. And then we took those students, and we put them in elementary schools in Pacoima. You know, it still sends chills through me, that period of time. But I said, Yes, I want to do this and spent the summer training and then got a faculty member, Dr. Barbara Rhodes, who was then a professor of Pan African Studies, it was called at the time, to be our advisor. She did the teaching. So I went out and I did the recruiting of the students. And we must have gotten 20 students or so to go through this training. And we [would] go out twice a week, to Pacoima from the campus, from the dorms, to teach ourselves and teach the classes. So that was the first clear effort to try to create strategies: one for students to have a sense of purpose and mission and self-efficacy and identity and then to do some sharing about that. It continued in my involvement, either in the BSU [Black Student Union], or other Black clubs and organizations. And then when I joined the staff here, then advising the Black Business Association. When I came on as advisor to the Black Business Association, there was at that time, but one Black tenured faculty member in all of the College of Business. Al Wright was his name, brilliant man, who's in accounting. And so, you know, I would go over there in that space, because the students saw me and asked me to be their advisor. So every Friday for years, every Friday at 12 noon, I'd go over and be the faculty member there during the meeting of that organization. And so I did that for many, many years. And so [I've] have stayed close to clubs and organizations since then, but have had the great fortune as an administrator here, to push the conversation about what we are, and more likely what we're not doing to improve outcomes for Black students here. And we're not doing a great job of it. Black students, to this day, are the least persisting and graduating students. And when we talk about equity gaps, or achievement gaps, the largest are between White and Asian students who are best performing students and Black males do the least well, embarrassingly so. And so I've been in that space. And now, my portfolio you read earlier on the department's that report to me, and it was kind of a list that you might want to go and update. But right now, Admissions and Records reports to me. And so I created an Enrollment Services unit. And we're doing a lot of collaborating there. But all of the recruiters are part of my responsibility. All of the admissions people are part of my responsibility. And I chair the counsel that I developed called the Enrollment Management Council, that is right now about the business of building an

enrollment plan for the future for our institution. One that has as one of its objectives: Reversing the decline in the number of Black students who are attending Cal State Northridge. Because it's been going down for at least the past four years. So now what I tried to do is to bring all of that into how I lead as it relates to underserved students of color. And speaking of that, right now we have a president that I just love working for. Erica Beck's values are exactly the set of values that Cal State Northridge needs now, to do the work that I think our campus can uniquely do, in helping to develop the workforce and leaders for this region.

[01:02:23]

JK: I think this is somewhat related. You mentioned this early on. The country has been undergoing a racial reckoning since the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Many institutions, including CSUN, are considering how legacies of racism are enshrined within our institutions and monuments and place names, etc. So could you talk about how that this particular historical moment is impacting the campus as well as your work?

WW: Yeah. Well, it is. And at this point in time, it's continuing to have an effect. I mean, I've been around long enough, good Lord, that I've seen us respond to various crises for a period of time, and then it goes away until the next thing arises. So right now, we are still living in the moment of the George Floyd incident. Murder. Something that was utterly inescapable. I mean, how could you not see what your eyes see? And that cut to the soul of our country. And I think that many progressives who have been in that space over time, but had not been catapulted and propelled by something as striking as what was seen there, really committed themselves to being more than people who are just verbal allies. To really, on the other hand, taking a look first at [oneself], and then secondarily, what are the ways in spaces that I'm in, that I can begin to create or confront the kind of systemic racism and inequities that are just baked into our structure? I mean, we don't even think about, it's just there, you know. That work is still underway. And it will continue to be underway when you have leaders like an Erica Beck, who'll keep our attention trained on JEDI, or justice, equity, diversity and inclusion values, core-equity values. You don't do that unless the leadership is unequivocal and dramatic in leading the way. And I think that is going to absolutely be the case across not just the academic side, because quite frankly, for all of this stuff we can do in Student Affairs and academic support service, the space that makes a difference is that classroom. If there's anything that if I were going to do a do-over I might do, it may have been to think about a life as an academic. Because there's no more powerful setting. All of the good that I know we do, it is the capacity of a faculty member to build and give flight to dreams, or to extinguish them. And it's just as stark as that. Much like Daniel Kessner was able to permit me to think not that I was just some failure, but rather to

say, Let's think about this together. Because here's what the real goal is, and I think you can do this. It could have been a very different story, and I might not be here. So I have experienced the power of what faculty mean, in the journey of our students. And as long as faculty are willing to do the work, because transforming is hard work. Rethinking how you deliver content is hard work. We don't give you extra pay for reengineering how you deliver. But faculty who are taking this seriously, beyond what you have to do deliver [it], because it's virtual. It's also thinking about, What really are the core learning objectives? And do they really even mean anything for a diverse community? You know, Am I delivering this in a way that taps into learning styles or creates space for students to share experiences in ways that they can have a sense of self efficacy in this learning space? All of that's hard work. And it's generally not what our faculties have been trained to do on their road to becoming faculty. So this is a special time. And I don't want anybody--I tell people in a heartbeat, If you want to be a part of change, now's the time to do it. The campus is not in poverty. The state of California has had a surplus. There are funds to do the things that we believe in. And there are values that should give, I think, fertile ground to those of us who want to re-engineer this a bit to achieve something better, not to achieve something worse, but something better. And that can be transformational for our communities.

[01:07:29]

JK: Certainly. I wanted to check in on time, I told Robin, this would probably take about 90 minutes, but I know we got started a little bit late.

WW: Yeah, I'm going to have to be over at the Department Chairs in Dean's retreat by 1:00, so that--kind of a hard stop. But we can we can reschedule for something.

JK: Okay. I think we can probably get through the key questions I have before then. Just tell me what time exactly you need to walk out the door.

WW: Okay. 12:45 I need to be going.

JK: So I think this is, because it's changed the campus so much, something important to touch on, but the sheer growth in student population at Northridge: how it came about, what impact it's had on the university, and then the broader impact, right? Northridge is educating thousands more students now than before, which has a regional even statewide impact.

WW: It's amazing. My AVP [Assistant Vice President] for enrollment services did just fabulous presentation to deans and department chairs at the retreat this morning, to help them understand how much enrollment has changed for us. And so we've gone through, several periods of, you know, somewhat flat, but inching up enrollment growth. And when we come to the 2000, and we begin then to just start the steady march of our enrollment, and we get to one year where we have over 40,000 students, and now we have begun to see our enrollment decline. And part of that declining trajectory has to do with population data and just birth rates. Some of it has to do with competition from the UC. How many people are aware that the UC has decided that they are admitting more domestic resident students as opposed to international students? And they've gotten rid of their use of SATs [Scholastic Aptitude Test] and ACT [American College Testing] as a part of the admission, so it's a great time for the students who perhaps couldn't have gotten UC before. Or you have Arizona State who's coming into the area here and competing for our kids. There are a lot of things that are going on that are creating pressures on our enrollment here. We will continue to be a large institution. We have the infrastructure here and we have the capacity and the will to serve our region. And we are coming up with strategies that will allow us to serve more students. For most of the last, almost two decades, we have been trying to depress applications because we were over enrolling. There was one year where almost 16% over-enrolled. So now this fall, we will barely meet [our] target, and maybe even be a little under enrolled. So that's a change in how we will describe ourselves, how we will go out and seek to bring students in, the kinds of alliances we will have with the community. We're learning how to tell our story better and that really excites me. But I think that we're going to do just fine. Things like the HSI [Hispanic Serving Institution] Global Innovation Institute are so emblematic of a desire to invest in this institution as a tremendous institution and service to this region.

[01:10:44]

JK: I think we can close on this question, which is one that I enjoy asking and hearing the responses to: What are your hopes for the University moving forward?

WW: They're pretty high. You know, I'm really kind of giddy on this institution. And again, trying to use what I get a chance to see that others don't, to really give a sense of excitement and possibility. Number one: to our employees and our faculty to say, Here's where we are in the sun. And here's the opportunity. And here's the moral obligation that we have for the students who are now coming in, to give them a better set of outcomes. Our six-year graduation rates must improve. Our retention and graduation of Latinx and Black students must improve. And our diversity of our faculty must happen. And guess what? We can get this done. And to celebrate the persona and the identity of who and what

Cal State Northridge is. We're not Cal State LA. We're not Long Beach State or San Diego State. We [have a] very special and unique history and tradition that is to be celebrated. And I think really developed in a way with the energy that a new president brings. New presidents bring that kind of encouragement. I think the president's address this Friday, I know she'll begin to talk about some of those, but I'm looking forward to having her on campus this fall, moving around, pressing the flesh, talking to the kids. We're all just so excited to have students come back and be in our presence. And so yeah, I think the future's bright for our institution.

JK: Well, we'll wrap it up there. Thank you so much.

WW: [laughs]

[01:12:42]

[End of transcript]