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CREATING A UNIVERSITY: UNF ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Creating A University: University of North Florida Faculty and Staff Remember 35 Years

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Abstract

Reflecting upon the past thirty-five to forty years at the University of North Florida, one is struck by several themes which have emerged over time. One theme reflects an initial opposition to the new university which gradually changed over time. In the beginning, the Jacksonville community did not welcome UNF. At the time, the city was the largest in the nation without a state university. There were no alumni to support it and few wealthy benefactors. Trustees at Jacksonville University opposed its establishment. In the early 1980s, the legislative delegation voted to make UNF a branch of the University of Florida. Officials at Florida Junior College opposed expanding UNF to a four-year institution. Yet the Board Regents and a few community leaders recognized the need. And there were housewives, military veterans, teachers, business men and women, and others who wanted to enroll and pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees.

The negative attitudes changed over time. Gradually the community came to support the university. Adding first and second year students, expanding the curriculum, and graduates working in the community helped bring about that change. So too did the relationships faculty and administrators developed with the local school systems, health care professionals, businesses, governments and the non-profit community. By the beginning of the 21st century, UNF had become a key player in Jacksonville's growth and development.

A second theme was that UNF developed as a university despite the frugality, some say the stinginess, of the state's funding over the years. Conditions began to change in the 1990s as private funding began to enhance public dollars, which also increased during this decade of prosperity. Economies of scale also played a part. As enrollments grew, more tuition dollars and state funds supported faculty growth, student services and campus development.

A third theme was the transition from a commuter school to a more traditional residential campus. In the first decade, UNF was a commuter institution with little campus life. Students arrived as if to a shopping mall, purchased their courses and departed. The construction of student housing in the 1980s began to build a campus climate, but the numbers were small. More rapid expansion of enrollments and housing in the 1990s and beyond has produced a more familiar university community.

A fourth theme was the character of the UNF faculty. Almost from the beginning, the enthusiasm of a young, well-prepared faculty recruited from graduate schools across the nation made a difference. They were accessible to students. They encouraged student intellectual growth and development with interdisciplinary programs, hands-on research, service learning, and international travel. It is not too much to say that faculty sought to transform the lives of many first generation, place bound students with limited life experiences. Students became graduates equipped to live in our complex global civilization.

It is to these Founding Faculty that I dedicate this history.

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