RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN DINER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH
and
DONALD KOGER

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY
MAY 6, 2019

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Shaun Illingworth: This begins the third interview session with Dr. Steven Diner, in Newark, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and Donald Koger, on May 6, 2019. Thanks for having us back.

Steven Diner: It's a pleasure.

SI: After our last session, you had some other memories pop into your head.

SD: Yes.

SI: I see academic accomplishments written at the top. What do you have to say about that?

SD: Yes. There are a variety of things, but the first was that I got the Faculty of Arts and Sciences to change the general education requirements. Every undergraduate student on the Newark campus was covered by the general ed requirements set up by the Arts and Sciences faculty except for nursing students. Like many schools, there were a wide range of requirements. Every department struggled to get its course included because that built enrollments. As a result, students had to take nearly sixty hours of courses to meet this general education distribution requirement. I worked to reduce it to around thirty credits and, this is the key, and have every student do two majors, or a major and a minor. For business students, in particular, this was a very big deal because of the overwhelming numbers of students were majoring in business. They weren't taking very many liberal arts classes. The idea was to have all students take two majors, but business students could not take two business majors. They had to take business and something else. Now, many of them, I think, have chosen economics, but a lot of students have taken history, philosophy, literature and other liberal art majors. This has been very successful. Around the country, humanities departments and most of the social sciences, are facing terrible decline in enrollments. That's not true here because of this dual major.

SI: I have a quick question.

SD: Yes.

SI: So, as mentioned, I think, in another session, one of the common debates in the history of American higher education is liberal arts education versus useful utilitarian education. I would imagine the pressure to get the latter is keen at a place like the Newark Campus, where the people are first-generation students.

SD: Yes.

SI: It sounds like you have found a balance there with the thirty hours. Did the students present concerns about that?

SD: No. Students didn't express any great concerns, and, more interestingly, I remember talking to at least one or two Newark CEOs who said, "That's terrific. People don't just go into business.

Every business is different. Every business has its own requirements and skills, and so on. It's very important that students not just be exposed to business but learn to study something else because that will better prepare them for the business world today," which I was thrilled to hear. My view was, and is, let's teach the students as broadly as we can. What they came to college for is not critical. While we hope students came to college to get educated, but, whatever their motives, we must expose them broadly to a range of subjects and assume that they will be better off and certainly more knowledgeable as a result.

SI: All right. Please continue.

SD: As dean, I also started a program in Portuguese and Lusophone studies. I was being driven between Newark and New Brunswick to meet Rutgers president by a faculty member in Spanish, Asela Rodriguez de Laguna, who retired a couple years ago. She told me "that Newark has the largest Portuguese population in the United States" and described the Ironbound neighborhood. I immediately became very interested in that because it fit my idea about how a liberal arts university should connect to its community. Asela was a capable person. So, I told her that we should start a major in Portuguese and recruit several faculty in this field. We did begin recruiting, and we appointed Kimberly DaCosta-Holton, who had her Ph.D. in Portuguese. She was very dynamic. Enrollments grew quite rapidly. She built ties to the Ironbound. Initially, she came on a one-year appointment, and then I moved her to the tenure track. We established the major in Portuguese and Lusophone Studies, which I'm very proud of. [Editor's Note: Asela Rodriguez de Laguna is Professor Emerita at Rutgers-Newark. Her husband, Elpidio Laguna Diaz, was Professor Emeritus at Rutgers-Newark. The Ironbound is a section within Newark's East Ward, in which there is a large Portuguese-speaking population. Dr. Kimberly DaCosta-Holton joined the faculty at Rutgers-Newark in 2000.]

You asked me a before about tensions or conflicts. One of the things I inherited as Arts and Sciences Dean was a tension in the English Department between a small number of creative writing professors and the majority of the English faculty who were scholars of literature. Basically, the traditional English faculty didn't see the need to have creative writers in the department since they were not scholars. I thought creative writing should be a really important program for our campus. So, I separated creative writing from the English Department. We had a bunch of townhouses that became vacant when the business school moved. So, I gave one of those to the creative writing faculty. I also, as dean, recruited Jayne Ann Phillips, who was the director of that program for a very long time. She's a fabulous writer, very distinguished, but she also recruited people who won big prizes. The creative writing master's degree has become a signature program of our campus. [Editor's Note: Jayne Ann Phillips is a novelist and writer.]

SI: Do students major in that? I know on other campuses; the creative writing department does service for other departments like teaching business majors how to write and engineers how to write.

SD: The primary program there is an MFA in creative writing. We also offer a minor in creative writing for undergraduates.

SI: Another question, so when you make a degree like that, I can see it potentially conflicting with other units in the university system, maybe in Mason Gross School of the Arts. Did any of those issues come up?

SD: Not in this case. Partly because the creative writing program was within the English Department. We were enhancing it and recruiting faculty, but administratively we were not setting up a new school department.

SI: Okay, great.

SD: I also established the [Joseph C.] Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, and that was just about the first thing I did when I got here. I was, as I've told you, very, very committed to the idea that the university should be connected to research on the cities and on Newark in particular. So, I formulated a proposal for that. Clement Price put me in touch with The Fund for New Jersey. I began conversations with it leaders about what I wanted to do in urban policy research and they were very taken with it. They wanted to name something after their founder, Joseph C. Cornwall, and they gave us significant funding, approximately a million-dollar endowment, to establish the center. [Editor's Note: Joseph C. Cornwall was a philanthropist who was the founding chair of The Fund for New Jersey. The Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies was founded in 2000.]

I also established the School of Public Affairs in Administration, SPAA. When I got to Rutgers, there was a small graduate program in public administration. It was a relatively weak program. Before I came, it had been in the Political Science Department.

In any event, early on, I connected with a faculty member in public administration named Marc Holzer. I soon discovered that he was one of the leading figures in public administration in the country and had a tremendous professional network and reputation and had done terrific scholarship. So, when I became chancellor, I turned it into a school. I found a building for them. I moved them into the building they're in now, and I made sure that Marc became the dean. He was not loved by some of the older cranky faculty, but he emerged as the leader and he recruited fabulous people, a number of senior professors, some of whom held title chairs at other institutions. [Editor's Note: Dr. Marc Holzer is the founding dean of the School of Public Affairs and Administration, or SPAA, at Rutgers-Newark. He served in the position from 2006 to 2016. He has worked at Rutgers since 1989.]

Then, we established a Ph.D. program jointly with NJIT and UMDNJ called Urban Systems. I really wanted an urban studies doctoral program, but the folks in New Brunswick said, "Well, we have the Bloustein School, we don't really need it. It's just duplicative." Through various discussions among leaders of the three Newark universities, we proposed a doctoral program in urban studies, with three areas of focus. One would be medical, and that'd be at the medical school. The second would be architecture, planning, design at NJIT. The third would be public policy at Rutgers Newark.

We put that forward, and there were no great objections from New Brunswick because it was a three-institution collaboration. We built that program, and it is now very active. However, the initial Newark director, Alan Sadovnik, focused it on urban education. A new director took over five or six years ago, Jamie Lew, and she shifted the focus more toward issues of public health. The program is quite vibrant. While it is nominally a joint program with these other two institutions, for all intents and purposes, it's a Newark-based program in cities and urban life. [Editor's Note: Alan Sadovnik served as director of the Urban Educational Policy Specialization in the Urban Systems Ph.D. Program, from 2004 to 2015, a joint program with the New Jersey Institute of Technology and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. He was also the co-director of the Institute for Education Law and Policy from 2004 to 2015. Jamie Lew is an Associate Professor of Sociology and co-director of Global Urban Studies.]

SI: Well, I am curious how you got the three entities together. Obviously, it dovetails with what you want to do in terms of tying in with the city. Was it something that faculty members at all three institutions thought about and brought to you, or did you put the idea out there and they ran with it?

SD: The second. The leaders of the three universities and Essex County College met once a month and discussed what was happening in Newark and how we could collaborate. Out of those discussions came this idea of a doctoral program in Urban Systems. There was enthusiasm on all three sides, although I like to think I was the main driver of it. There was great interest in this Ph.D. program on the part of the faculty. The program wasn't narrowly urban but had a much broader focus.

I also take pride in the faculty I recruited, particularly as dean. I talked about the people like Kim DaCosta-Holton who I recruited for Portuguese studies and others. At one of the annual conferences of the Coalition of Metropolitan and Urban Universities, I went to a panel where a speaker talked about how you can use art to relate to urban students. So, I went up to him, introduced myself, and said, "Hey, any interest in coming to Rutgers-Newark?" Anyhow, this is Nick Kline. He's done incredible work. He has a whole studio now in the Hahne's Building. He keeps telling me when I see him, "It's all thanks to you. You got me here." [Editor's Note: Nick Kline is an Associate Professor in the Department of Arts, Culture and Media, Photography Program at Rutgers University-Newark. The Hahne & Co. Building, of the former department store chain headquartered in Newark, is a part of the Rutgers-Newark Campus.]

SI: I have just a general question. One of the things I think we talked about in the last session was obviously providing access to students in the city, but most of the conversation focused on the undergraduate level. I guess, in general, how well do you think people form the city itself were getting into graduate programs, even doctoral programs, or was it mostly people from outside?

SD: Some of the master's programs drew significantly from the local area. For example, we ran an executive MBA program, at night and weekends for working professionals, almost all of them

from the Newark metropolitan area. I don't know how many lived in the City of Newark. We also had a fair number of school teachers, museum staff and other working professionals, who wanted to enhance their credentials, through a master's in history or American Studies.

SI: Okay.

SD: The bulk of Ph.D. enrollment was nationally based. Many master's programs were heavily local because most people don't travel to a new place they haven't lived in just to study for a master's. They'll do that for a doctorate, and for the doctorates, there'll be financial support and so on. So, yes, the programs that are strictly master's are heavily local. The Ph.D. programs, which include a master's, are national.

Very small thing, we talked about facilities, and the one that I forgot to mention was the Life Science building that has gone up here in the last couple of years. I played the key role in planning that and getting initial funding for it. It seemed very clear to me that we had strong faculty in the life sciences and we needed labs for them and we needed better classrooms.

Now, regarding national recognition. [Editor's Note: The American Council on Education is a nonprofit that was established in 1908.]

SI: The fellows program.

SD: The American Council on Education is the umbrella national organization for higher education. For many years it has run a program in which mid-career faculty or staff interested in university administration spend a year interning with the president of another institution. I was an ACE Fellow in 1983-'84.

SI: George Mason, yes.

SD: Yes, I did my ACE fellowship at George Mason. A new director of the program wanted the fellows to learn more about diversity. Each year the Fellows program picks one institution to study in depth. The program director asked if "Rutgers-Newark could be their institution of study for the year." Of course, I was absolutely delighted.

This is just a quick aside. At the time, I had established something not unlike the ACE Fellows Program. A Rutgers-Newark faculty member who had interest in administration would spend a year in the chancellor's office. The first year, it was Sherri-Ann Butterfield. She had responsibility for working with the ACE fellows program to set up the fellows visits to and engagement with Rutgers-Newark. The following year, she was selected as an ACE Fellow. Clearly, we were now seen as an institution doing very creative and important things that needed the attention of the future leaders of higher education. [Editor's Note: Sherri-Ann Butterfield is Executive Vice Chancellor and a professor of sociology at Rutgers-Newark.]

SI: In general, what do you think they took away from Rutgers-Newark?

SD: The importance of community engagement. I'm sure they took away some insights into ethnic intergroup relations, but our campus is so unique that most of it doesn't apply to other places. We have quite substantial numbers of black students, Hispanic students, white students and Asian students. We had the fellows meet with a good number of faculty engaged with community programs and with programs about ethnic and racial discourse and interactions, both on the academic side and in student affairs.

SI: Yes.

SD: You asked me last time, were there any conflicts? Well, there's one I definitely have to tell you about. After I revised the general education requirements, what had happened was that, as I think I said, Rutgers-Newark, the School of Arts and Sciences was basically the school. Business, at the time, when it first began, was a very tiny program and then it grew and grew and grew, and then majority of undergraduates wanted to study business.

So, one of the things that had happened was that the School of Arts and Sciences advising office was responsible for advising all the business students, as well as the other Arts and Sciences students. After I did this change in the core requirements, which I think was very good for the liberal arts faculty because of the dual major, but once I did that, the business school leaders and faculty argued that they had said they should advise their students, instead of being advised by Arts and Sciences. Phil Yeagle, who, at the time, was Arts and Sciences dean, was infuriated when I shifted that responsibility to the business school, and he sent out letters to the faculty condemning it. At an Arts and Science faculty meeting, they voted no confidence in me based on what he had told them. It wasn't a unanimous vote by any means. I had told him that the new general education would go forward, and if he [didn't] like it, he could go somewhere else or step down as dean. He told the Arts and Science faculty that I threatened to fire him. So, there was a hue and cry about that.

Yeagle had also systematically cultivated a relationship with Dick McCormick, which was not typical for Newark deans. I knew that he was telling McCormick that I was not really committed to Rutgers, that I was committed to the City of Newark and that I wanted a separate institution. So, when McCormick removed me from office, [he] appointed Phil Yeagle as the acting chancellor. Then Todd Clear was appointed the interim chancellor, and Yeagle became the vice chancellor. Shortly after Nancy Cantor became chancellor, he was removed from his administrative role. He was a tenured faculty, but nobody knows what happened to him. He has not come back. [Editor's Note: Philip Yeagle was the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science from 2007 to 2011. He then was interim chancellor from 2011 to 2013. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut. Richard L. McCormick was president of Rutgers from 2002 to 2012. He is now President Emeritus and history professor at Rutgers. Todd Clear is a Distinguished Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers-Newark. He joined Rutgers in 1978. From 2010 to 2014, he was dean of the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers-Newark. In 2013, for six months, he served as the interim chancellor and lastly, from 2014 to

2016, he served as provost. Dr. Nancy Cantor assumed the office of chancellor at Rutgers Newark in 2014.]

SI: Oh, wow.

SD: When I stepped down or was forced out, campus and community leaders planned a wonderful banquet in my honor, at the Newark Museum. There were all kinds of terrific people who spoke and blew me away. The one I remember most was Cory Booker, who was then mayor, and he said, "Steve Diner is the Nelson Mandela of Newark." [laughter] "He stood up for the needs of Newark against the people in New Brunswick." Dick McCormick had asked me if he needed to come to this banquet. I told him, I thought he should be there. I did that quite deliberately because one speaker after another turned to McCormick, pointed at him, and said, "What you did was disgraceful. What you did was terrible." It was humiliating for him and for Phil Yeagle who sat next to him. [Editor's Note: Cory Booker served as the mayor of Newark from 2006 to 2013. Since 2013, he has served as one of New Jersey's Senators.]

SI: I am curious, when they were searching for Nancy Cantor, did they come to you for advice, or did you play any role in that?

SD: Yes and no.

SI: Okay.

SD: I wasn't approached about who do I know or what qualities should we be looking for? But Clem Price was--I don't know if he was on the committee or closely associated with it--he was associated with everything. One day, I got a phone call from Nancy Cantor, who I had met at various urban university discussion meetings. She told me she had been offered the Rutgers-Newark chancellor's position. She told me she had applied because I had talked so vigorously about Newark and all the great things happening in Newark. She said, "Clem Price took me around the city, and every corner he turned he said, 'Steve Diner did this and Steve Diner did that." So, in that sense, Nancy said to me if we hadn't met previously, and if I hadn't talked about how dynamic Newark was, she doesn't think she would've agreed to be a candidate here. I'm proud of that. [Editor's Note: Clement Alexander Price was a Distinguished Professor of History at Rutgers-Newark. He lived from 1945 to 2014.]

DK: Now that I think of it, when you were developing new schools and programs, one that comes to mind, if I am not mistaken, was developed around the same time was the global affairs studies. Does that occur in your time?

DK: I'm curious how that came to be a thing here.

SD: Yes, it did happen under my tenure. Brian Ferguson, an anthropology professor, was heavily involved in studying and teaching global affairs. I suggested that we start that doctoral program. My general attitude was, the more doctoral programs the better for us, because we

were still seen by many as an undergraduate branch campus of New Brunswick. It also seemed very appropriate for us because we had so many students from all around the world. [Editor's Note: The Division of Global Affairs (DGA) offers a Ph.D. in Global Affairs.]

SI: We usually talk about family. Is there anything you want to add about your family now? You can say for the record, your children and grandchildren, whatever you would like.

SD: They're fine. [laughter]

SI: Okay, all right.

SD: They're great. They're wonderful!

SI: Okay, all right.

SI: All right, thank you very much. Again, if you want us to come back, we can do that.

SD: I don't think so.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 8/29/2019
Reviewed by Donald Koger 3/16/2020
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 3/18/2020
Reviewed by Steven Diner 4/1/2020
Reviewed by Donald Koger 5/7/2020