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## Interview no. 773

Diana Natalicio

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Diana Natalicio  
President, University of Texas at El Paso  
November 22, 1989  
Charles H. Martin  
Diamond Jubilee Anniversary

This is an interview conducted by Charles H. Martin on November 22, 1989 with President Diana Natalicio in El Paso.

M: Let's walk around.

N: You can feel that pollution coming in . . .

M: . . . here . . . Why is it ticking? It must be the tape. All right, we'll go ahead and start here. Why don't you give me just a little bit of your, an idea about your background in terms of your education and how you ended up here at UTEP?

N: Well, I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, and went to public schools there. Then [I] attended St. Louis University as a commuter student, living at home, and I worked part-time as a secretary. My father had wanted very much for me to be well prepared for the job market when I was in high school, so I took typing and shorthand and worked my way through college. I was the first in my family to go to college, and so there are a lot of ways in which I feel very, sort of . . . sympathetic or have a good deal of sensitivity to our students because I was very much like them, as a commuter and as a working student. In my senior year at St. Louis University, the institution was seeking . . . recognition by Phi Beta Kappa. To do that they had to demonstrate the accomplishments of their graduates, so they asked a group of us who were in the honors program at St. Louis University to apply for a variety of scholarships and fellowships for graduate school and what not, among which I applied for a Fulbright, thinking that I would under no circumstances get a Fulbright, but [I] ended up getting a Fulbright to

Brazil.

For the first time in my life I left home and I went from Saint Louis, Missouri, on my first plane ride to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I got down there and I did a year as a Fulbright student. The president of Brazil at the time resigned. It was a disruption of the educational institutions, and I ended up spending a year traveling and learning Portuguese. I learned it well enough that UT-Austin came down and recruited me as a teaching assistant in Portuguese. From Rio de Janeiro, I went to Austin, Texas, and I became a T.A. in Austin and worked on a masters degree in Portuguese. [I] completed my masters' degree in Portuguese in 1964 and received a scholarship from the Gulbenkian Foundation Lisbon, Portugal, and spent the next eighteen months living in Portugal, studying literature of Portuguese Africa. [I] wanted very much to go to Portuguese Africa. But because there were some problems there [at] that time, ended up being granted authorization only to Cape Verde Islands, where I spent some time. That's not a place where you want to spend a lot of time, but I spent a sufficient amount of time. Very interesting place actually, but just a little isolated. I came back to Texas from Portugal [and was] recruited by the graduate program in linguistics--urged me to come back and get a doctorate, which I did.

M: This is at UT.

N: At UT-Austin. Spent the next three years in Austin and got my doctorate in 1969, then worked a year there as a research associate in the Center for Communication Research. Then [I] was offered a visiting faculty appointment as a visiting associate professor at UT-El Paso replacing Jack Ornstein, who had gone on leave.

M: This was in?

N: Nineteen seventy-one. Came out here and fell in love with the place,

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Just loved El Paso. Had never been in the desert before, but I found the climate to be just exactly right for me. I liked the dry climate, and I liked the region very much, and I especially liked being on the border, because my background had been in romance languages and linguistics. I thought it was just splendid to be able to live in the United States but be able to go to Mexico with so easy . . . a distance. When I was offered a tenure-track position the following year in linguistics, a joint appointment actually in linguistics and modern languages, I said, "Yes, I'd love to." So I've been here ever since. It's been, of course, a very good place for me. I feel like I've really had great opportunities and like living here very much; the people are wonderful. That's kind of it.

M: What about the administrative positions you held once you began to become an administrator?

N: Well, I became a department chairman almost by default. Most people do. I became chairman of the languages, then the Modern Languages Department, because the chairman went to Romania on Fulbright. There seemed to be some factional differences, and I was kind of an unknown quantity, I think, so they assumed that I would be the best person for that job because no one really knew me very well. I found that I liked it. I didn't admit that at first, but I found that I liked it. So then I was asked by Dean Small to be associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts after I served as chairman for a couple of years, or three years, I guess it was. Kind of foggy on years now. Went into the dean's office as associate dean, then I was acting dean, then dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Following that, Dr. [Joseph] Olander left the university, and the vice-president's position was open. I decided that I'd like to try that and applied and was selected for that position. And of course Dr. [Haskell] Monroe left, after about . . . I think

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I was in the the vice-president's office for three years. I really had a five year plan for that office, for what I wanted to carry out. And debated with myself for quite a long time actually about whether I wanted to make that move at that point. [I] finally decided that I couldn't carry out that agenda, probably if somebody came in with a different agenda as president, so I might as well go for it. I agreed to be interim president, then subsequently a candidate for the position. I became president in the summer of '87 I became interim president and in February of '88 I became president . . . was named president by the regents, actually how it happens.

M: Okay. Since you've been at UTEP for a while, [I] wonder if you might reflect upon what you think have been some of the major changes or milestones or developments in the university's history, particularly in the 1960's and 70's?

N: Of course I wasn't here in the 60's, but I arrived here in 1971. When I arrived I guess one of the things that I was aware of was that there had been a considerable activity in the late 60's. At the turn of the decade, in terms of social movements, like most university campuses around the country, students at UT El-Paso were interested in some of the issues of the day: the Vietnam conflict, the kind of social issues that were facing our country. Like most campuses our students expressed their views about these things and felt a great need to somehow gather together and share their concerns and speak out on these issues. In 1972, when Dr. [Joseph R.] Smiley -- Dr. Smiley was president when I arrived. In 1972 Dr. Smiley resigned as president and I was appointed. -- I remember I was quite struck because I was a brand new faculty member in my first year of a tenure-track appointment. -- I was appointed to serve on the selection committee for Dr. Smiley's replacement. I was quite honored and was asked to be secretary, as most

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women were in those days even -- was thrilled with that because I thought that was really quite an honor as well. Our committee had one meeting in early December, and over the Christmas holidays we learned that Dr. [Arleigh B.] Templeton had been appointed by the regents to be our president. This was my first sobering glimpse of just kind of how things sometimes work -- pragmatism is taught in such moments. There was a flurry of activity right after that. We met as a committee and filed some kind of statement of our disappointment that our committee had been ignored or that the process had been truncated. The argument at that time and the reason that I bring it up now is because the argument was that there was social unrest out here, on the campus, and that there was a need to make the -- to fill the -- vacancy immediately, to provide the leadership and to get on with the university's business, so Dr. Templeton became our president. Some of my idealism, I guess, was a little bit shaken by that experience, but I did learn from it, as did all the other faculty members on the committee. I think as we move through the 70's, what I remember best about Dr. Templeton's tenure as president was his effectiveness as a spokesman in Austin for UT El Paso. I think he was very good at that. I think he was very closely tied to a number of people in Austin and therefore could get their attention and could make our case. He was also very effective in getting some buildings, building projects, under way out here, and we certainly needed those; the university was growing. He built a number of buildings that I think are, you know, important to us to today: the Special Events Center for example, where Don Haskin's basketball team does its thing, and certainly the Union . . . the West or the East Union, which is a very fine facility, this administration annex, the Engineering Complex, the Fine Arts Complex. All of these facilities really Dr. Templeton was very much involved in. I guess the Fine

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Arts Building was finished right before he became president, or the concept was finished right before he became president. But the building was completed right once he got here. He was very much a builder, both, I think, of ties with Austin and of facilities on our campus. I think another major event, a very important event was approval of our doctoral program in Geological Sciences. As a non-doctoral-granting institution, I think we very much needed the recognition of a doctoral program to be taken more seriously. I think geology was a good one for that, because it did represent very much continuity in terms of our institutional history. It represented a strength, certainly in terms of faculty research and activity. And I think symbolically that degree was extremely important, both in terms our credibility as an institution in other parts of the state, but also in terms of what we stood for historically as an institution interested in the geology of this region and the productivity of that.

M: Okay. More recently in the 80's, as you yourself were involved in administration, what were some of the changes that took place in the early and middle 80's?

N: I think again, under Dr. Monroe's leadership, we certainly made some progress in terms of expanding our campus facilities, our enrollment was growing--during at least part of that period--certainly the College of Business Administration Building was an important building for a program that was growing very rapidly, not only in UT El Paso but around the country, and we certainly needed to accommodate those students. I think the most striking building on the campus, during Dr. Monroe's tenure as president, was certainly the construction of the library building, which will be five years old this year [1989]. It's hard to believe that it's already five years old.

M: That's true.

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N: But it is a building that has very high visibility from the interstate highway. It is a building that is very impressive in terms of its Bhutanese, or border Bhutanese style. And a building I think our students are very proud of. It provides them with much needed study space. Our students, again, may not have those kinds of facilities. Our old library building was terribly cramped, so it really has served a real purpose. I think it's also a building in which they take great pride, and they bring their parents and friends and relatives on Sundays to show them the building. We have a beautiful collection of art in the building, which I think is good for our students and for faculty. It's good for all of us to have beautiful pieces of creative work around. I think those two building projects were certainly important. The 80's were a little bit uneven in terms of budgetary support. We've had a lot of ups and downs in terms of the state's economy, so we probably spent more of our time than we would of liked during the 80's, Dr. Monroe and some of the other administrators, on trying to balance the budget and trying to cope with some of the constraints imposed upon us. With the growing enrollment during much of the period and a constrained budget, that makes it very difficult to manage. The other major event that I think occurred related to the budget was the fact that tuition was increased, rather substantially during this period. That was four years ago. The steady growth in our enrollment was abruptly truncated by the tuition increase. This had a particularly devastating effect on students from Mexico, who had been involved in academic programs here, and our enrollment went down from over 600 Mexican students to 235. That was very, very bad in terms of our regional emphasis. I would say fiscal constraints were certainly a theme of the 80's. I hope we're getting out of that.

M: Okay, that sort of touches on one the questions I had, which were about



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some problems we've experienced recently. Is there anything else on that in terms of difficulties or problems or dilemmas before we go on to talking about major recent events since you've been acting president or president?

N: I guess in the problem category certainly budget constraints are a major problem. Money does solve a lot of problems, and it's certainly the case that . . . if you have resources you can usually find a way to work around most things that happen. I think we've been very fortunate in a lot of ways because we have had access to the PUF [Permanent University Fund] and have been able to work towards the development of our physical plant, of our library materials, and our research laboratories. Those institutions that haven't had such access during the 80's have had real problems. I think we have probably seen the worst of the economic problems, but areas like the library are having great difficulty recovering. Problems such as the costs, the sky-rocketing costs of journal subscriptions, make it very difficult for us to keep pace even if our budget were not constrained.

M: Have we always been eligible for PUF funds or was there a time . . . . .

N: Oh, no we've . . .

M: . . . where we have been?

N: . . . always been eligible. We've been one of the institution that has been most fortunate in that respect. We've had PUF funds for a long time. Some of the other components of the UT System were just brought in just a few years ago when the Higher Education Fund was developed--Higher Educational Systems Fund, it's called. It used to be the case that institutions that weren't involved in the PUF had to go directly to the legislator for appropriations. Really we've been very fortunate in our building program, and our campus really reflects that. What's been encouraging has been

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broadening the basis of PUF to research laboratories and libraries.

M: That's a good point.

N: I think another problem has been for us, as an institution, that our community is undereducated. We need more educational opportunities for young people. Our drop-out rate is a serious problem, not just because these students don't come to us as enrollees but because this community really does need a larger base of at least high school diploma people. I think we need to work very hard on that. Our community needs for economic development and just for the development of its people, a much stronger educational base.

M: What are some of the milestones, if you want to call them that, or significant developments just in the last couple of years since you've been in the president's office or as acting president or that are imminent in their arrival?

N: I think, basically, well, there have been several things that I think are important. One certainly is the authorization that we've just received to offer a second doctoral program, this in electrical engineering. After we succeeded in getting the doctoral degree in geological sciences, we were categorized as a single doctoral granting institution by the Coordinating Board. That designation by the Coordinating Board was extremely frustrating for a lot of people. I don't think that you do anybody very much good by truncating their aspirations. I think that's what that single doctoral granting institution category did for us. I think achieving against of odds, a second authorization for a second doctoral degree really says a good deal about the quality of our faculty and the research efforts over in electrical engineering, but it also says there is a growing recognition that UT-El Paso is an important institution in the state and that its role in the state is changing. That is extremely important. The degree is important for the

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people who will be served by it, but the degree is even more important for what it represents for the community and for the institution in a general sense. We're going to admit our first students in January. What I understand from the dean of the college that of the first five students, two will be women, which will greatly increase the number of women electrical engineers at the doctoral level. We're very pleased about that. Another major accomplishment, I think, certainly was accreditation of the College of Business, again because it validates what we do and it says to the world, not just to the communities, though certainly to the community, that we are a quality program. This is important in terms of our visibility state-wide and nationally that people know that we are an institution to be taken seriously.

M: Now this is actually an advanced accreditation because the business school--as degrees conferred by UTEP from the Southern Association--had always been accredited, so this is like an extra . . .

N: That's right.

M: . . . plum . . .

N: That's right.

M: . . . or how would you phrase it?

N: Well, all of our programs are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, but we have discipline-specific accreditation in engineering, nursing, and in education. And we're conspicuously absent from the roster of institutions that are accredited with business. What this really is is a stamp of approval for the programs in a particular discipline, by people in those disciplines. What it says is, you have met the highest standards of our discipline. It was quite important that we set out on this quest. We were very pleased that we were able to meet the standards. Our programs undoubtedly for several years had been of a quality sufficient to be

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accredited but we actually had to go through the procedures to get that accreditation. Again this says to the outside world that we are indeed a quality program, that graduates of our program have met the highest standards. I think a major accomplishment this past year [1988-89] was that we were able to bring in over 19 million dollars, nearly 20 million dollars in new contract and grant awards for research. This is important because it represents an increase of 15 million dollars over the previous year. The previous year's total was the highest we'd ever had before, so we have really made a quantum leap in terms of our research funding. This has occurred for two reasons. One, because as an institution that serves a majority of minority-student population we are eligible for certain special kinds of programs. Once we are eligible the next step is, the next ingredient is, you've got to somehow be competitive. Faculty have to write competitive proposals and they have. We are very competitive within that group of institutions. This again is a major accomplishment not just because we bring resources to the university and to this community and create jobs for students and do all kinds of important things internally, but also because it says again to the outside world that we are an institution to be reckoned with. We are serious, we are quality, and they need to pay attention to us, whoever they are. The momentum that has generated--we're at a point now where it used to be that I had to do all the calling and all of the initiation of contacts. It is now the case that people are calling us. What happens is that they're interested in us because they know that we received this grant or that grant or because we got that accreditation or because we got that doctoral program. Suddenly we are a hot property, as an institution. People want to be associated with us. We don't have to ask now to be associated with them. We still have to write proposals, we still have to be quality, we

still have to do all things but it's very nice to have people call us.

M: This is the seventy-fifth year anniversary of the founding of what has become UTEP. What sorts of activities is the university participating as part of this Diamond Jubilee celebration?

N: We've divided the Diamond Jubilee into three phases. One is to commemorate the past, a second is to celebrate the present, and a third is to challenge the future. The way we have attempted to approach this celebration, which is an important one in a lot of ways, is to try to identify historical events that we think deserve commemoration. We've done some of that. We've commemorated for example the establishment by the regents of the institution with a plaque out here on the corner of Hawthorne and University. We have commemorated service by members of the UT-El Paso community in the Vietnam conflict by adding them to the memorial triangle and rededicating that triangle to include them. We have attempted to focus on our Bhutanese architecture, by bringing in speakers on that, trying to focus on kind of a development of the institution and to commemorate milestones along the way. It's very interesting for me that the university was founded in 1914. When you think about what was going on in El Paso at that time, with the revolution in Mexico and all that, it's quite amazing that our community leaders would have been of a mind with all that instability to have wanted to establish a mining school, to build a county hospital, to build a city county building, to build a St. Patrick's Church, to build Elephant Butte Dam. I mean all these things were going on at the same time. It was obviously a great deal of energy and vision. We want to try to commemorate that some how, to capture that spirit because we'd like to think that the spirit today, 75 years later, is somehow regenerated and really going forward. Celebrating the present is primarily an effort through the pretext

are very committed, I think to this institution and to the kind of students we serve. I think unlike a lot of very large research universities, faculty have direct contact with under-graduate students, even freshmen. Most of our freshmen students are taught by regular faculty. We use TA's sparingly. We don't have the kind of distance between faculty and students that you find in a lot of institutions. I think from that perspective our students have an opportunity very early on to see role models and to hear directly from faculty. A lot of our students have very special opportunities because of some of the federal grant programs we have, research grants which allow students to be employed in research laboratories and get some very extraordinarily good experience early in their academic programs, because again we don't have so many graduate students that bump the undergraduates out of the picture. I think we're trying very hard not only in our classes and our laboratories to make sure that our students have a quality experience and we think that they do. But we also have a number of support services that help students find their way as first generation college students through this rather large institutional process--study skills and tutorial services, the advising center--the kinds of support mechanisms that I think are very important for all students, but particularly for first generation students. I think we're very committed to a quality experience. We believe that the real measure of a university is the quality of its graduates. We are not judged I think by who enters, but by who exits with a degree. I think that the value that we add between admission and graduation of our students is so far greater than at most institutions because our students are unsure of themselves many times and don't have the kind of self-confidence that they need. Our students don't normally finish a degree in four years. The average is about six, and that's not because they're not good students

but because they're employed and they have family obligations and they simply can't hurry their way through. They're not in a dormitory next door to the campus or on the campus. They're living at home. They're commuting students just as I was. I think we need very much to be sensitive to their needs. I think overall we offer a very nice balance between the kind of quality that you expect at a research institution because faculty here do research but we also do have a good deal more compassion for students and their needs than you might find at a strictly research institution. So maybe we have the best of both worlds. We'd like to think so.

M: That's pretty much my list of questions. Do you have anything else you want to ...?

N: I can't think of anything. I've expounded on just about everything unless there's something special you need or want.

[END OF TAPE]