

Interviewee: Nicholas Oehm

Interviewer: Jeidi Pinto

Date: February 24, 2022

JP: Hi. Good afternoon. My name is JP, I am currently a student enrolled in the spring 2022 course, history of higher education and have been assigned to interview an individual that has been with FIU for more than 20th years. I have decided to interview an old professor and mentor of mine known as Professor Nicholas Oehm, who works for the FIU STEM Institute, where I did take a few classes as an undergrad student. Today, 02/24/22 I will be interviewing NO through zoom. The individual will be joining from his office on campus, and I will be joining from my workplace. For the interview, I'll be focusing on a few questions, that have to do with background, experience of FIU, and thoughts about FIU accomplishments and international image. So now moving on to the interview. So, I am going to start off with a little bit on background, if I could just learn a little bit more about yourself. So, if you can tell me a little bit more about yourself,

NO: Um, with respect to,

JP: education, maybe your hobbies, your values.

NO: Okay. Um, education. Um, so my undergraduate degree in environmental science, um, minor in biology and concentration in what was it, the political economy of environmental degradation and that's from Allegheny College and, uh, Northwestern, Pennsylvania, uh, very different, very different experience than, than here at FIU, um, schools about 1800 students total. Um, my graduating class, well, we started at 618 and was much closer to 500 by the time I graduated. Um, and I moved to Miami in 1995 to do my graduate work here at FIU. Um, did my master's degree in biology here, um, studying carbon mineralization in mangrove soils, um, which is just a fancy way of saying the decomposition in soils. And, um, after, after graduating, I started teaching high school. I taught high school for 15 or 16 years. Um, during that time I've never really left FIU, um, because I've continued to be engaged in Everglade's research. Um, so in 2006, uh, I became the education outreach coordinator for the Florida coastal Everglades. LTER, uh, LTER stands for long-term ecological research, and I've been in that role since then. Um, and I returned to FIU full time in 2014 as one of the first faculty hires in the FIU teach program. I guess that's, I guess that's education and career

JP: Discuss in the paper when I'm writing it. And I did want to ask what made you want to come to FIU to pursue your graduate degree? Your master's in biology.

NO: I got to zip around the Everglades in boats and airboats and helicopters doing my research.

JP: Was there anything about the community that attracted you to FIU?

NO: It was in Miami. Um, that's, that's all that I knew about FIU at that time. Um, in 1995, FIU was not even half as large as it is now. It was about between 20 and 25,000 students then. Um, so it has grown the campus that was here when I was a student is very

Interviewee: Nicholas Oehm

Interviewer: Jeidi Pinto

Date: February 24, 2022

different than what you see today. There was a lot more green spaces, um, that are filled with buildings now, buildings and parking garages. Um, so what attracted me to FIU was, was the funding. I got to work in the Everglades, um, and it was, it was not Pittsburgh, um, which is where I'm from. I was born and raised in Pittsburgh. Um, people ask me what it, you know, oh, it must be nice in Pittsburgh or what was it like? And I say, it's nice to be from, uh, nice people. Um, but I wanted to get away. So what really attracted me to Miami is it, it was something very different than where, where I grew up. Um, I had never been to the beach until I moved until I moved to Miami. Um, so it's very, it's a different lifestyle attracted me here. Um, I think what has kept me here is, is, is some of the diversity, you know, Miami is a diverse Latin community globally. It's not quite as diverse as maybe New York or, you know, Los Angeles might be. Um, but it's certainly much more diverse, um, cultural, uh, it's more diverse than, than what I would've experienced in Pittsburgh and big city. I like, I like for being an ecologist. Um, I like the comforts of, of, of a city.

JP: And what made you want to come back and be a full-time instructor at FIU

NO: FIU teach and the Stem Stem Institute Um, it's a, it's an innovative FIU teachers, an innovative program. I, what I'm helping people to do is exactly what I did, but in an organized way, um, I had to try and figure lots of things out on my own, being a scientist that then started teaching in the K-12 realm. And I've always straddled both of those worlds, the teaching and the research 'because, I can't pick which one. I like more there's some days that I like the teaching more there's some days, and I like the research more. So, I was already doing what I was going to be asked to do in this role. So, it just made sense. Um, and it was the next, I wasn't looking for anything, but it was, you know, the next step that I could take in my career. Um, so it gave me an opportunity to participate more actively in research than I was able to do so when I was teaching full time. Um, I think that FIU, I think, and know that FIU is a leader in the kinds of things that we're doing here, particularly in serving traditionally underrepresented communities. So, I really appreciate that. I think that it's important and it makes me feel like I'm part of something much bigger than myself in giving back. And I think that FIU I'm proud of the fact that FIU is as engaged in the community as it is. I don't think that our, I don't think that the other local universities invest in much and our community as FIU does.

JP: And as a student, were you involved in any other programs outside of academics, with FIU that helped you better get to know FIU as a student?

NO: No, they were there really wasn't that type of programming for graduate students. The biology department was probably a third, the size of what it is now. Um, so I knew just about all of the faculty. Um, my experience as a graduate student was much like a family and we did things together as a family. Um, there was not much life on campus after hours at that time, because there were no dorms. They had the, the apartments that still sit on the Northeast corner, but that was the only housing that existed on campus. So it was, I would say probably 99% commuter. Um, and as a graduate student, the focus of your life is, is your research. So the social programming for us, or any sort of

Interviewee: Nicholas Oehm

Interviewer: Jeidi Pinto

Date: February 24, 2022

programming was us helping out our friends in the field, which would be going on cruises out into the Atlantic to collect samples or road trips, to collect other samples, go to meetings and stuff like that. So it was usually, it was, it was academic related, but there's, it's hard to sort of tease that out of what's your life and what's fun. And what is school because it was so intertwined,

JP: Right And then through your program, you also did get to know the community, the staff workers, and your fellow students, and also peers. And then I do want to ask, how has your perspective change of FIU from being a student to being a professor

NO: A lot Um, so as, as a student coming to FIU, I was a graduate student coming to FIU from an undergraduate institution of about 1800 students to, uh, university. That was more than 10 times that size, the level of attention and service was very different. Um, I was spoiled as an undergrad. Um, and when you come to a much larger school, it's more about efficiency and trying to get things done than people taking the time and have relationships with them. Um, I knew the Dean of Students first name basis. I knew the registrar. Um, I knew the director of residence life, had dinner with these people. Um, so that was a different experience coming here and trying to register for classes. Um, it was very different than it is today. We would stand in the line, you know, to register for classes and be like, oh, you have whatever hold, okay. How do I get that fixed? Oh, you go to this window, you go to that window. Oh, I don't see it on the computer, but where do I go? Go to this window. So it's the constant run around. Um, and so it's very frustrating as a grad student because it's a much smaller community and a more limited, some unique issues. Um, and everyone was just sort of getting herded in and it didn't seem like anyone, it felt like no one wanted to help me or my, my classmates. So the university structure itself was, was frustrating to me and to students at that time, because if it wasn't, if a mistake wasn't caught, we didn't get paid for a month and grad students don't get paid a lot. Um, so it was, it was hard on, it was hard on us and it really shaded that experience that we had on the flip side of that, my department was a lot like a family and help give us a sense of belonging and that people cared about you. And they were able to sort through some of those, those challenges on your behalf. I was also part of what is now the Institute of the environment. But back at that time, it was called the Southeast environmental research program, which was another sort of family that we were part of. Um, so for the frustration that, that balanced, the frustration that I, that I personally have with dealing with registering classes and, um, you know, your, your stipend and your class is being covered, you know, so, but now as, as a faculty member and coming back and seeing how far the university has come in that time, it's so much more streamlined. I now recognize that it's because FIU has grown so quickly in such a short period of time. It's difficult for the procedures to keep up with the rate of growth. So I see that now because I have this institutional history and experience, but I didn't have that then as a student. And quite honestly, I don't think that it would've made a difference anyways. Um, but I see how much the administration and the faculty have made a conscious effort to try and improve that experience for students and while no system is ever perfect. I think that they've done an amazing job at resolving some of those issues.

Interviewee: Nicholas Oehm

Interviewer: Jeidi Pinto

Date: February 24, 2022

NO: We still are going through growing pains because we're the fourth largest university in the nation. That's, that's a lot of students and that's a lot of things that need to be tended to, But I think the people here really care about the students and the student experience, and it shows in the education that our students are receiving. And the feedback that I get from students

JP: And did, you always see yourself as an educator or going into the field of education as an instructor.

NO: Did I always see myself

JP: Going into the field as an educator?

NO: So As a kid, I would play school with my friends and stuff like that, you know, um, I liked, I like, I like to be in charge. I always liked to be that, wasn't what I thought I would end up doing as a career. Um, I had had great science teachers in school. Um, Some of which I still stay in touch with. And So that, that great experience that I had in the sciences, why I went into science, um, just like every, not every, but most biology students. I started out as biology. Um, like most biology students. I was, I was planning to go to med school and, you know, chemistry and calculus hits and sort of, you know, realigns, realigns your perspective and ambitions. And, and honestly, I didn't really enjoy some of the, some of the coursework that I would have to do. Um, I took an ecology class as part of my biology distribution. Most schools have to, um, my school had three, um, and the third course in that sequence was ecology, ecology and evolution, and going out in the field because our college had a 300 8380 acre environmental preserves. So in ecology every week we get in a van and we were recording trees, saving streams, coring lakes, you know, walking out when they're frozen, coring, them, taking sediment samples, going out in boats, like canoes to like collect samples and stuff. I, I was like, you can do this for a job? Um, so that's how I, I was like, well, maybe, maybe med school, isn't my thing. But I, I dig this ecology thing. Um, so that sort of realigned me those experiences. Um, and they were critical in getting me to where I am today. Um, so getting to grad school, um, I liked, I liked teaching, um, but I liked the research too. So nothing's really changed. Um, after getting towards the end of grad school, um, you know, you make a decision whether you're going on for your PhD, um, or whether you call it quits. Uh, I decided to call it quits because I was just tired of being a student. Um, I, I went to grad school early. Um, not there aren't a lot of people that go directly to grad school from their undergrad and for good reason, because you're kind of need a break. Right. Um, I think if I had done that, I would've probably continued. Um, so when I finished, I just, I like, I need, I need a job. I need a paycheck, I need insurance. Um, and I had a friend that was a teacher and he said, you have your master's in biology. He's like be a teacher. Um, so I applied, I got the job and I said, oh, I'll do this five years. And you know, here we are, what, 25 years later I'm still doing, I'm still teaching. Um, although what that looked like has changed over time. Um,

NO: In 98 I started teaching high school, but I also was faculty at Miami Dade college. Um, and

Interviewee: Nicholas Oehm

Interviewer: Jeidi Pinto

Date: February 24, 2022

I, I taught at Miami Dade until what, 2020. Um, I was at Miami Dade as faculty of the biology department longer than everyone in the department, except for one person when I left. Um, and then the opportunity came up with, with a, for you teach. Um, so I think that probably somewhere deep down inside, I wanted to be a teacher, but maybe didn't want to acknowledge or admit that because I had something else that I wanted to do too. I think I didn't realize that you can do both. Um, and here I am doing both and also, And also, And also in a PhD getting my PhD in biology too because I'm still doing the work that I would need to do for that anyways. So it all is coming full circle.

JP: And what was it like going from like working at a public school to working for FIU, let's say, were there any like noticeable changes you noticed,

NO: Uh, aside from the obvious, you know, change and level of maturity and types of discussions that you have no teachings teaching is teaching? Um, I think the most important aspect of teaching is connecting with another person. Um, and that human connection is the same, no matter what age they are, you might change the way you say something, but the idea's the same. So I don't think there's a, I don't think there's a big difference aside from the age.

JP: Okay. And then going back to FIU, FIU is known as Florida International University. Would you say that the university is international from your experiences with the college as a student and professor?

NO: Yes, it is. And it has become more so, Um, I, by default it was, it is international because of the Latin community in South Florida. But the university in my time being here has started to make great efforts towards including to broadening that international community here in, at the university. And I've noticed the difference. We're getting, we're getting many more students from across Asia, um, Europe, and, you know, still central south America.

JP: So you believe it has accomplished its international goal or it's getting there?

NO: I believe that it's accomplishing, I think it's accomplishing that. It's a, it's an active process. It don't the world, the world's a big place. So there are always some stones that are unturned. Um, I think that we need to, there are other continents out there too, you know, um, I have a few friends that were colleagues, uh, from different places in Africa, but we don't have, we're not as well represented in by students from Africa. Um, I will say one thing that comes to mind is one of my, uh, faculty member from biology and a good friend and a friend of mine. Um, she left FIU, she's Liberian. She left FIU and as the president of the university in, in Liberia, um, that's more of an aside though, but,

JP: And then based on your experience, what are your hopes and dreams for the future of FIU? Last question,

NO: My hope is that we continue to grow and provide a world class education to our students and get the recognition that we finally, that we've, that we deserve. Um, I think that we have really established that we are a world-class institution and was, it was a nice feeling to beat university of Florida last, last year at the, in the, in the state and the state

Interviewee: Nicholas Oehm

Interviewer: Jeidi Pinto

Date: February 24, 2022

rankings by the Board of governors. Um, so there's a, there's a new kid on the block and, uh, we're starting to make great strides and I there's there's, uh, we've got, we've got great students that are going to be doing some really great, great things. So I'm, I'm proud to have been a student here and I'm proud to be faculty here.

JP: Okay. Thank you. Really appreciate you doing this last minute. Let me stop the recording.

[End of Interview]

Transcribed by: Jeidi Pinto and Ashley Floyd Kuntz, PhD