Introduction

I am Charmaine Tomczyk, director for the Coastal Carolina University History Project which collects oral histories from individuals who contributed to the university’s growth and development. Today I am interviewing Professor Gene Collins who has taught math and computer science for over four decades at Coastal.

Prof Collins earned his advanced degree at the University of South Carolina in 1972 and began teaching at Coastal a few years later. He began as an instructor of mathematics and retired as Professor Emeritus. He served as chair of the computer science department from 1989 to 1993. He designed several new courses and taught classes in computer languages and operating systems. He is a Phi Beta Kappa member as well as other honor societies.

In 1979 he was the first director of the local high school math contest held annually here at Coastal to participating high school students from a dozen South Carolina counties. The contest was sponsored by several local businesses and the Horry County Higher Education Commission.

Prof Collins served on more than 30 university and faculty committees including the NCAA certification review in 2001 and he contributed to and edited the self-study for the Computer Science degree program to be granted accreditation by the Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology (ABET) in 2003.

Transcription of Gene Collins interview, February 14, 2018 by Charmaine Tomczyk

Tomczyk: Hi, Gene, thanks for meeting with me today. I’ve been wanting to interview you about your time at Coastal and get some more information about your impressions of Coastal and the kinds of things you have seen change over the many years that you have been here.

My first question is about teaching. You began teaching at Coastal in 1972, is that right? Can you explain how you learned about the job at Coastal, the hiring process and why you took the job?

Tomczyk: Thank you, Charmaine for having me. It’s an honor to be able to talk with you again. Well, I’m a Horry County native. There are not too many of those around anymore. I graduated from Conway High School; this was in 1966 and Coastal was still a regional campus of the University of South Carolina, a two-year campus. And I had intentions to major in math and go on to the University of South Carolina, but I got a scholarship, a full tuition scholarship to Coastal from the William Kimbel group, a William Kimbel scholar.
So I took the offer and came to the Coastal. I was quite familiar with the college. I remember when the first building was built here on campus. I wanted to major in math. I had a professor here at Coastal that was my inspiration for wanting to teach in college. I had thought about teaching on the secondary school level. William Kirkland was his name. He has passed away now. He was my mentor. I was his student grader as a sophomore, graded all of his homework papers and so forth. After I finished here I went on to Carolina, Columbia, and worked on my master’s degree. Towards the end of that time at Carolina I think in March or so, I decided I’d give Dr. Kirkland a call. I wanted to see if there were any openings at Coastal I might want to teach at Coastal.

It was a good institution. I had some of the best education you could ask for. I was really prepared when I got to Columbia, particularly in math. So I visited with him one weekend and he said. “Gene, there are not any openings, but why don’t you just give Mildred Allen, the secretary, your resume and maybe something will come open.” And so I went on, said thank you and we talked a little while longer and I left. I didn’t think much more about it until after I graduated.

I got my master’s degree. And I called again. And they said “No, we don’t have any openings”. About a month later I got a call from Mildred Allen, Dr. Singleton’s secretary. She said “Gene, Dr. Singleton would like to meet with you.” I said OK.

I came into his office one day and sat down and he said. “Would you like to teach at Coastal still?” and I said “Yes, I would”. He said “We have an opening.” I said “well”. It turned out my favorite professor was retiring. And I didn’t know that, but he was retiring because of medical reasons. Dr. Singleton said “I want you to take his place.” I said “I would be glad to.” He said “You can have the job.” It didn’t pay much, like $8,000 a year plus 15% of your base salary if you teach summer school, guaranteed to teach summer school - 15%. I said I’ll take it.

**Tomczyk:** As a math major I’m sure you did a quick study of that. And it was a good salary at that time, wasn’t it?

**Collins:** It was pretty good for a starting instructor. It wasn’t bad.
Tomczyk: And the 15%, I remember calling those faculty “obligated faculty”, meaning that in order to entice them to stay in the summer -- of course you probably would [stay], you are a Conwayite -- but to entice them to the job and to stay in the summer they would have that 15%.

Collins: That was written into the contract. They had to do that throughout. I think I was the last person that they had to pay the 15% to.

Tomczyk: You got in just in time.
Well, I think that’s very prophetic. How sweet that it was his position that you were taking over.

Collins: It’s sad also though. It turns out that Dr. Kirkland passed away that August of that year.

Tomczyk: Wow, so quickly.

Collins: Yes, he had cancer. I didn’t know. He didn’t tell me that when I met with him that day. I knew he was ill; he was not feeling very well but he didn’t tell me how ill he was. I came to find out, it turns out he kept up with me the entire time at Carolina. He had contacts up there with the professors. And he had been keeping track of me. And Dr. Singleton knew me. There was no interview process. It was, “Gene, you want the job?” and I said “Yes, I’ll take it.” Because they knew me.

Tomczyk: It sounds like they were doing the interview process for several months without you knowing, before they hired you.

Let me ask you a little bit about the department you came to on this campus. We were still very small then. Can you explain a bit about your position because you were a math major?

Collins: I started out in math, I was a math professor, a math instructor. That remained the case. There was no computer science at the time. I wasn’t in computer science. I had taken a couple of classes at the University of South Carolina, programming classes. I had an interest in that but there was a course in BASIC, I think, that was taught. But basically I came in to teach math and calculus and college algebra and trig and things like that. Then we transitioned and so what happened is….
One day my department chair came by and said --this was in I think in 1979 – he said, “Gene, there is a computer science institute that they are starting at the University of South Carolina during the summer.” He knew that I had an interest in computing. He said “It is a summer long institute and you will be able to take nine hours of graduate courses in computer science.” What the idea was, there was a shortage of computer science professors at that time. So the University was starting this institute to train math professors and others who were technically inclined in the field of computer science.

He said “If you are willing to go, the university will pay your tuition.” It was open to others outside the university system, too, but they had to pay. He said “We will pay your tuition and you will have to pay your room and board.” I jumped at the opportunity. It was a three-summer session, three summer institute.

**Tomczyk:** You stayed in Columbia at that time; you didn’t commute back and forth? You were able to stay there?

**Collins:** Stayed on campus and did the work. Didn’t have time to commute back and forth. They kept us really busy in that institute. The second year, the second summer, the university had started something called a *faculty exchange program* with the regional campuses and the main campus. You would go and get your normal pay that you would get. Well, I was there for two summer sessions and they paid me 30% of my base pay, just like I was teaching, to go to the institute. So I got a free education and came away with 27 hours of graduate level computer science. And then that is when we transitioned into the computer science area.

**Tomczyk:** OK, so it was after two summers of intensive course work and credits…

**Collins:** Three summers

**Tomczyk:** Three - that Coastal then created some courses that you could teach?

**Collins:** Well, what happened was…as I took courses, not maybe the first summer but after the second summer, I took the classes. I’d come in the fall and start teaching underclass courses, the beginning courses, the same courses that USC Columbia was teaching because we had to teach the same courses they were teaching at that time. And so I would take graduate courses and come back and keep adding a course or two the next year. We did that for a couple of years. After I finished the institute I would gradually add a course or two to the curriculum.

These students who were taking it were transferring someplace else to finish their degree. They were going to Columbia. I had one student that went to Clemson and
by the way, he came back and got a job at HTC and did quite well over the years. So we just kept building the curriculum and finally we had enough courses in that we could develop a program and we finally got it approved by CHE [South Carolina Commission on Higher Education] and starting offering a major in computer science.

**Tomczyk:** Those early years we really were parallel with the University of South Carolina. We were part of the system so we had to offer the exact same classes that they did.

**Collins:** That’s right.

**Tomczyk:** And we were only a two year at that time and then for a year, I think, we were a third year before we got a fourth year. So there were a few years when students could take the classes then transfer up.

**Collins:** The first few years I was at Coastal we had ... Well an interesting thing was in 74 or 75 somewhere along there, our legislators got something passed that if we got 800 FTE enrollment we could add the fourth year and begin offering degrees and so that’s when we began to expand our curriculum here.

**Tomczyk:** I believe we were able to do that because we counted Myrtle Beach Air Force base students, as well?

**Collins:** Yes we did. And Dr. Singleton would always encourage us when we advised students to add an extra course or two. Let them take an overload of classes to build up the full time equivalent. You didn’t have to have an 800 headcount but you had to have an 800 FTE. So we did things like offer a History of Horry County in the gymnasium. We would build that up to 200 or 300 students. That was an extra class to get to that 800. Those were the things we did to get to 800.

**Tomczyk:** Well that was very clever math on our part.

**Collins:** Yes, it was.

**Tomczyk:** So when we became a four year institution then, we could offer what essentially was the USC computer course?

**Collins:** No, not really. It was different. We had to go through CHE just as we do now. I developed the program with the help of others in the department. We developed a curriculum that was a little bit different from USC Columbia. It had some of the initial courses. Many of the courses were the same. But then we had some additional things we added. We added a business component that would
allow what we called a commercial option at the time whereby the students could come in and take traditional computer science courses plus some extra things that would direct them towards business applications.

**Tomczyk:** So we were really working towards the market we had here perhaps more than there...

**Collins:** That’s exactly right. I told the powers that be here, “You know our students, if they graduate with just a computer science degree as proposed by Columbia, it’s very theoretical and they are not very prepared to go into the commercial aspects of things.” That’s what I geared it towards. We didn’t have things like information systems and information technology degrees back in those days.

**Tomczyk:** That came later.

**Collins:** That came later.

**Tomczyk:** Well, that’s what intrigues me about your background here because the computer science department, it seems to me, has got to be one that had so many different versions and changes and curricular adjustments and different tracks.

**Collins:** Yes.

**Tomczyk:** You really had to keep up with all that while at the same time trying to get accreditation.

**Collins:** Yes, we did. It was a lot of work. It was a lot of study. I remember teaching classes where I had a few weeks before I had to study and learn some of the materials because it was new. I had never had some of this stuff. We had to learn before the students could be taught. But as time went on – just keeping up required a lot of reading, a lot of journals that you read. You’ve got to keep up to date. Every day there is something new coming out.

**Tomczyk:** Well, that’s true today, isn’t it? I know a lot of young people know more about computers - just how to use them - than I do. How did you find the Coastal students at that time? When you were trying to keep up yourself with that knowledge. How were they in picking it up? I mean was it like today they came in and knew a good bit about one portion about those topics?

**Collins:** No. They didn’t know anything. They would come in knowing nothing about computing. They didn’t have personal computers at that time. When we first
started the degree program it was all done via mainframe. They had these terminals that were connected to the mainframe in Columbia. We were really advanced; we didn’t have to punch out IBM punch cards like we did when I was coming along.

**Tomczyk:** I remember those.

**Collins:** Well we had these dumb terminals that pretty much mimicked what you put on the IBM cards. You type in your program and submit that via the terminal and wait for the results to come back.

**Tomczyk:** Were there computer labs at that time, Gene, or were there computer classrooms?

**Collins:** No. Over in the Singleton building there were some terminals set up in that – I don’t know what’s in that building now in that area– but on the first floor there was a big room there where all the technology stuff was located. We had some terminals in there and students would come in and take turns at the terminals.

**Tomczyk:** Were you teaching evening classes? I wondered what hours they were open.

**Collins:** No, there were no evening classes. That room stayed open all day because it was the same room where all the printers were and the keypunch machines and the card readers and university computing.

**Tomczyk:** So academic and administrative computers were all in one room?

**Collins:** It was all together.

**Tomczyk:** Wow, that’s amazing? You talk about how much work it was in the department. How big was the department back then? Do you recall?

**Collins:** The computer science area? For a long time what it was, was math and computer science combined. We didn’t split out until later but that’s another story in itself. It was math and computer science department. And then Dr. Subhash Saxena was the director over the math portion and I was the director over the computer science area.
**Tomczyk:** So you were co-chairs?

**Collins:** Sort of like co-chairs; it was interesting. It was totally different from what we have today in the department. We had a computer science and math department then. You had the school of computer services, I think it was called at the time.

**Tomczyk:** Was that like data processing?

**Collins:** No, the computer services was sort of like the ITS [instructional technology services] today. It was all in one. It was like the head or director was in charge of university, Coastal computing plus we had the academic side all together. That separated a little bit later.

**Tomczyk:** Because they have different missions, don’t they? It would have been hard to keep them together. Since you mentioned the split of the department. Tell me a little bit about how that came about. Even today as we are growing, we split departments. Recently psych [ology] and soc [iology] split. How was it with math and computer science? Was it an amicable divorce?

**Collins:** Oh yes. We didn’t like the split at the time. It came as a surprise.

**Tomczyk:** Oh it was dictated that it split.

**Collins:** We came in on Monday morning with no hint that there was going to be a re-organization. The entire university had been re-organized academically. Colleges were formed. Here the next thing I knew computer science and math were separated in separate departments. And computer science was placed in the school business and math went with the school of science.

**Tomczyk:** What was the reason for it? That you recall. What was the word on the street? There wasn’t any? It was just a re-organization?

**Collins:** I don’t know. If there was a reason they never shared that with us. It just happened.

**Tomczyk:** You were in the college of business – or I should say the school of business - for several years.
Collins: That was a good thing and not necessarily the best thing for us. It was good -- in terms of the relationships we had with business -- was good. We had a commercial side of the computing so that fit in very well with the business side.

We felt like the people over in business thought of computer science as just word processing and spreadsheets. That’s all they saw. They just saw the application and not the other. We just felt it would be a better fit if we could get in with the college of science. We kept asking for that and finally they reorganized it again and put us in with the college of science.

Tomczyk: You make that sound so simple but I’m sure it was many years of coaxing and justification. Who were the chairs at that time; that kind of led the way?

Collins: Well, I was the chair while we were part of the school of business. Then when we moved over to the school of science Dr. Sheel became the chair. I stepped down after five years. I had enough of that. Administration is not for me. So I turned the reins over to Dr. Sheel. He was the one that led us into the college of science.

Tomczyk: You must have really loved teaching. You gave that up to teach five classes?

Collins: I was teaching five classes per semester – five preps. And some of those were still computer science and math. I still taught math up until – I can’t remember exactly when– but there was a long time there where I kept my hands in the math side of it as well.

Tomczyk: Maybe the late 80s probably?

Collins: Yes.

Tomczyk: Is there anything else about the department and all those changes that you would like to comment on?

Collins: No. Like I said, it changes every semester; it seems like there is something new. It was some good times. I really enjoyed it.
**Tomczyk:** Before I leave the academic side of the curriculum I wanted to ask you a little bit about the accreditation process. I know when Steve Sheel was here, you worked very closely with him in creating the self-study for the association…. Let me see if I can get it right. Um…

**Collins:** If you get it right, you're going to do better than I do.

**Tomczyk:** ABET stands for … the association…

**Collins:** the Board of Engineering and Technology… the Accrediting Board.

**Tomczyk:** It was really quite a feather in our cap to get that. It is a pretty rigorous test to go through to get that accreditation for a fairly new program.

**Collins:** Oh yes, we were really excited that we were able to get the accreditation on our first try. Now a national organization recognizes us as a legitimate qualified department of computer science. We were really excited over it. It was a lot of work to get there.

**Tomczyk:** I’m sure it was a lot of late hours and going over all that data and preparing that self-study.

**Collins:** I edited that. I think I lost a few of these hairs at that time because it was a lot of work. And then we had to do it again in six years. Had to do it the second time.

**Tomczyk:** And certainly there was a visit from the organization on campus?

**Collins:** They visit every six years. They will come back in another six years. We’ve done two of these now and there is another cycle coming up in three or four years – something like that.

**Tomczyk:** They are rigorous for a reason I guess. That’s how they get good quality I guess and integrity of that accolade.

Let me shift to something else about faculty duties on campus. I think from the beginning - since the first building on campus opened - faculty did more than teach. The faculty were always expected to take on additional responsibilities for campus services. Can you talk to me a little bit about some additional roles you took on?

**Collins:** Gosh, I think just about every committee on campus I think I was on at one time or another.

**Tomczyk:** I think you were, too. I see your name a lot in the archives!
Collins: When I first started, it’s interesting the things that I learned. You learn so much about a university or college when you participate in these committees. I was elected as a faculty senator to the regional campus faculty senate. Periodically we would have a meeting of all the regional campus representatives. Then I got to know people all across the regional campus system.

Tomczyk: I believe that system was set up so that every four years, which I guess was the term at the time, one of the chairs of the regional campus faculty senates would be represented in Columbia.

Collins: Yes, that’s correct.

Tomczyk: So it would rotate so Coastal would have a rep at one time and then Aiken and then Spartanburg. So that was really quite a coup for you to go back to your old haunts and be in Columbia for a while. [NOTE: These are two different representative groups: one that Collins mentioned of ALL regional campus reps from departments and another of faculty governance reps mentioned by Tomczyk of the Faculty Senate or Assembly chairs.]

Collins: It was and when we got our degree program we met quite frequently with the faculty up in Columbia. We had meetings up there and conferred back and forth and we shared ideas and so forth as well. It was a close relationship for a good number of years.

Tomczyk: A very beneficial one, a positive one. I would guess over time some research came out of that, too. So you could collaborate with faculty at the other campuses.

Collins: That was just one of the things I did. I served as chair of the student affairs committee, chairman of that in the early years. I got to know a lot of students from that. It’s amazing what you can learn and the relationships you can build through these committees. I had that privilege.

I had the privilege of helping write up the first math degree program. Dr. Saxena and I worked on that. He was the primary person but I helped with that.

I served as Vice Chair of the faculty senate here for a number of years. For one semester I was the Chair of the faculty senate, interim Chair when the Chair could not serve. That was interesting. I got to see something about faculty governance and the relationship with the administration.

Tomczyk: That position puts you closer to the administration and shared governance where the lines are drawn for authority.
Collins: Another interesting committee I was on. I don’t know if you were here at that time or not. Sally Horner, who was the chief financial officer at the time, she decided one year we would have a faculty committee that would help develop the budget. It was called the Tactical Annual Budget Committee or something like that, TAB - I know that anyway. [Tactical Advisory Budget Committee]. We had representatives from the various departments and schools. We actually developed a budget. And I think that’s unheard of in academia any more. It was an experiment. I don’t think it went over too well with the deans and the chairs who weren’t very well represented.

Tomczyk: I remember Dr. Horner being very collaborative and very social in her approach to her work. She would bring a lot of different departments together. She was a Chemistry Ph.D. I believe.

Collins: I think that’s right.

Tomczyk: So while she had financial experience from other colleges she was always open to hear opinions of faculty in assisting with the budget.

Collins: She was. It was an eye-opening experience for me and the other faculty who served on that committee. We were able to see firsthand the problems in developing a budget. How tight the budget really is. It wasn’t just a myth out there about the budget being tight. We could see it with our own eyes. Again, that was just another aspect of the college I got a chance to look at.

The accreditation process was another. Having edited two of those documents, I believe I got a firsthand knowledge of how to assess programs. I actually went to a conference out in Las Vegas that taught us about assessing programs, how to properly assess them. I learned a lot about that and then I retired. [laughter]

Again that’s another aspect of it. And then I served on the intercollegiate athletic committee. I had a chance for several years to interact with the coaches and athletes and see things from their perspective.

Tomczyk: At that time we were in NCAA. Weren’t we?

Collins: Yes, we had just gotten into the NCAA at the time when I was on that committee. That was right.

Tomczyk: And you might have been involved even peripherally on getting involved with them and getting that designation for Coastal. We were NAIA for a while before NCAA.
Collins: I think I was on that committee when we made that transition. I know I was on that committee when we hired the current baseball coach. We brought him in.

Tomczyk: Gary Gilmore?

Collins: Yes, Gary Gilmore. The athletic director wanted us to interview him. He wanted our approval and we gave it with our blessing and you know the story there. [NOTE: Gilmore led Coastal baseball to the College World Series win in Omaha, NE in 2016.]

Tomczyk: Is it true he got a trailer?

Collins: Oh, yeah. He got a trailer. A lot of people were in trailers. Believe it or not when I first started here all the faculty were located in the Singleton Building. Everybody.

Tomczyk: Hard to believe.

Collins: We shared offices. Everybody had to share offices. Then a couple of years after, as we grew more, they pulled trailers up by the Singleton Building. I remember Roy Talbert and Subhash Saxena and two or three others were in the trailers. We had trailers all over the place.

Tomczyk: They were portables we got from the school district?

Collins: Well, these were just regular trailers, like a mobile home trailer, single wide mobile homes pulled up there. Then we had portable classrooms that we taught out of as we grew. I don’t know if you remember the portable classrooms or not.

Tomczyk: Is it true the stories I heard about after a good rain, the muck and the mud that would be tramped all over?

Collins: Oh yes. My office was over in Kearns Hall. I had classes over in the portable buildings by the retention pond -- which was nothing but a pond and a bunch of woods. But yes, you had to walk through the mud to get to it sometimes, you’re right.

Tomczyk: But you persevered?

Collins: Oh we did. I guess those were the good ol’ days, right?

Tomczyk: You were all in it together. Did you do some club advising, Gene?
Collins: Yes, I was advisor to Numbers & Bytes the computer science club for a number of years.

Tomczyk: Isn’t that still active today?

Collins: It still is. We got a chance to get close to a lot of the students. We went on field trips to Chapel Hill and Clemson and Columbia and a lot of places.

Tomczyk: What would a Numbers & Bytes field trip look like? When you went to those places, what would you do?

Collins: For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had a department that emphasized virtual reality at that time. We came in and they showed what they were doing with virtual reality. We actually got to use the glasses and look at the programs a little bit and talk with the people who were writing the code. Very interesting.

Tomczyk: How did you find those connections?

Collins: I don’t remember. It may have been one of the faculty members or might have even been one of the students that had discovered that in some of their research. I don’t remember how we got there. I remember getting there but I don’t remember why.

Tomczyk: However, you got the information and you acted on it. Did you ever do some coaching? Sports coaching?

Collins: No, that’s the one thing I haven’t done at Coastal, it’s coaching. I feel like I’ve done everything else. I haven’t swept the floors.

Tomczyk: I bet you have but you just didn’t remember…

Collins: Maybe I did. I don’t have any brooms. I couldn’t sweep… [Smiles]

Tomczyk: Were there any other “outside of classroom” activities that took up more of your time while you are here at Coastal?

Collins: There probably are some others……I’m trying to think. It seems as time went on it seems I had less and less time to serve on committees. I was chair of the department for several years, like I told you a while ago. That gave me some insights into administration and so I did not want to do administrative work. I’ll stick with teaching.

Tomczyk: Nonetheless you learned a lot about it.
Collins: Oh yes, all of these activities were enriching and added to my knowledge of things.

Tomczyk: So what are the things that really keep you interested in continuing to teach? Because you are still teaching now on a part-time basis - that’s a lot of years. What keeps you passionate about it?

Collins: I’ve been in the classroom teaching for 46 years. Now the last five years have been part time. I fully retired as far as regular classroom teaching about five years ago. The last five years have been part time; a couple of classes. I just enjoy it. I like the fact that there is a different set of faces every semester. It’s a challenge to start and I’ve been teaching mostly freshmen in that time period of part time work. I try to take a student who doesn’t know much about programming or thinks he or she knows a lot but they don’t know as much as they think they know and then encourage them to learn and to be able to use that computer more productively.

Tomczyk: So you really see their growth from the beginning of the course to the end? It must be satisfying.

Collins: Those that try, I see the growth. Yes I do. There are some that don’t quite do what you want them to do.

Tomczyk: Of course a whole other aspect of teaching I hadn’t thought about was advising. You were probably doing a lot of advising. Particularly as department Chair, you probably had petitions to sign and those sorts of issues.

Collins: That was another. We didn’t have a large department. But I was advising both math and computer science for a long time. It will keep you busy. It sure will.

Tomczyk: So you said you retired in a way. When you finally retire completely from Coastal – teaching, what do you plan to do?

Collins: I don’t know. That’s a good question. This is going to be my last year in the classroom

Tomczyk: Spring 2018.

Collins: This spring semester is going to be my last semester in the classroom. I am going to try something new in the fall. I’m going to try teaching online classes. I’ve never done a distance learning online course before. I told Will, my department Chair, I’d like to try that. I won’t be in the classroom but I’ll be communicating with the students by way of the computer.
Tomczyk: Telecommuting?

Collins: Yes, so I’ll be busy with that for a while.

Tomczyk: Another learning curve I guess. Are their faculty in your department who are teaching online now?

Collins: Oh yes, we have a number of online courses now. In fact I’m going to lean on them a little bit to find out what they are doing and get some ideas. It will be something different, something new.

But my wife and I will do some travelling. That’s just about all. We have lots of things [to do]. We like to do gardening and things like that so I’m hoping we can do more of that now.

Tomczyk: Is she a teacher as well?

Collins: No, she was an administrative assistant for a long time. She worked in a day care for a while. She loves children. She has been retired for a while.

Tomczyk: Oh, so she was waiting on you?

Collins: That’s right.

Tomczyk: Do you envision that Coastal will ever have an online degree in computer science?

Collins: Well we do have one. It’s pretty much online. The master’s degree. It’s pretty much all online. It may happen with the BS degree eventually.

Tomczyk: Well let me switch to some of the final questions that I ask everyone that I interview. They are a little more general: what do you see as the biggest change at Coastal since your coming here?

Collins: [laughter] Well, ah…

Tomczyk: or even in recent years? – take a decade?

Collins: When I first came here there were three buildings on campus. Ok. The William-Brice gym was just opening up. There was a little bit of change since then. [Smile]

Tomczyk: Then there was Kearns and then Singleton; those three.

Collins: No, there was the Singleton building, the Atheneum and they opened up the Kimbel gymnasium.
**Tomczyk:** So Kearns wasn’t here yet.

**Collins:** Kearns wasn’t here yet, that came a couple years later. And then the student union building.

**Tomczyk:** And then the library a little bit before that.

**Collins:** The library and student center. Yes there’s been all kinds of growth. I’m amazed at the changes in the past five years. For the last few years, the computer science department was relegated to across the railroad tracks on the other side of campus.

**Tomczyk:** in the Atlantic Center – east campus.

**Collins:** In the Atlantic Center, that’s right. I never came over here very often. I drive over here, park and do my teaching and then leave. I didn’t come here [to main campus]. This semester and last semester was my first semester back [to main campus]. I couldn’t find my way around I didn’t know where all the buildings went. Everything had changed.

**Tomczyk:** In that short of time.

**Collins:** It’s beautiful. The one thing I’m so impressed with is the master plan they have for this campus. I always complained in the early years that it just didn’t look like a college campus. You know, the way we had everything laid out. But now it does. It’s a beautiful campus. They really put a lot of thought into that planning process. It’s stunning now, compared to what it was.

**Tomczyk:** I think you probably served on one of those long-range planning committees over the time you were here.

**Collins:** I think I was; yes, I think I was.

**Tomczyk:** What do you think are the challenges for Coastal as it moves into the future?

**Collins:** The challenge for Coastal I think is going to be continued growth, I’m sure, but hopefully it will not be as rapid as it has been. I think we have to get away from depending so much on the tuition. Right now we have been able to do things because we just increased the enrollment and the tuition helped to pay for some of the bills. But we will come to a place where we can’t physically add that many more students. I think the challenge is going to be finding resources, private donations and so forth that can help support us in the coming days. Hopefully there will be more of that because we are going to have more alumni making money and
hopefully sharing that with Coastal. I think that’s going to be one of the biggest challenges. Trying to keep this institution affordable -- and yet make it a quality education for the students – is a challenge.

Tomczyk: Yes we heard recently at the Provost’s meeting that we are certainly tuition driven. We get very little money from the state. Good observation; I don’t think anyone has ever said that yet in these interviews.

Collins: Really?

Tomczyk: Yes. It’s the big picture. I think those years as a department chair really gave you that long view.

Collins: Probably did.

Tomczyk: What was the most significant event at CCU that changed you or had an effect on you during your time here?

Collins: Oh, that’s an easy question. It was that day when Warren Karstedt, my department chair, told me that there was a computer science institute at the University of South Carolina. From that day forward everything changed with me. I loved teaching math and I loved computer science. It was a life-changing moment in terms of my career here at Coastal. That was the one big event that changed everything.

Tomczyk: So you were happy to take that opportunity when it was offered to you?

Collins: Oh, yes. I certainly am. I love math but computer science is changing day by day. I like that aspect of it. There is always something new.

Tomczyk: As you think about your time at Coastal, Gene, are there any specific events here you wish to recount – or some specific memory or impression you would like to leave us with?

Collins: A lot of them I already shared, many of them with you. But thinking back I remember the excitement of that day we reached that 800 FTE and were able to offer a four-year program here at Coastal; that’s something we were all excited about.

I also can remember the time we finally got our computer science degree approved. We had a number of students who took courses as we were developing the program; they were completing the courses. We had one young lady, an administrative assistant, Patsy Homes, you remember Patsy?

Tomczyk: Yes, I remember Patsy.
Collins: She and some other students would take classes as I offered them. She was working here and taking the classes and finally she had enough credits by the time we had the program approved. She was able to be our first graduate in computer science. She had a 4.0 GPA and she went on to Georgia Tech and was awarded a fellowship there and then came back and taught here for us for a couple of years as well.

And then I remember a number of people who are here now still that I taught; people like John Hanna, over in ITS. He was one who took the courses as we were able to offer them. Matt Nicholson, Fadi Baroody, he is still here in the ITS area. Another one that comes to mind is Abdallah Haddad who is the head of ITS. He was one of my early students in computer science. I see them and there’s always that memory you will never forget.

Tomczyk: You talk about some of the building going up on this campus; it sounds like you were responsible for some of the personnel growing up on this campus as well.

Collins: Yes, a number of them, that’s for sure. What else? When we finally made the move to become independent of the University of South Carolina that was quite a memory…

Tomczyk: In 1993.

Collins: Yes.

Tomczyk: You know at that time there was a real division between the faculty point of view of whether we should split or not. I’m curious about looking back, do you remember what your colleagues’ points of view were?

Collins: I think we had mixed emotions about it. We could see the good and the not so good. But I think we felt like it was the right move with the people I associated with. We were happy with it.

Tomczyk: I ask specifically because of your relationship with Columbia, not only as a colleague with the departments up there but also as a student and getting more instruction.

Collins: I miss that aspect of the relationship because we don’t have the contact with the department that we used to have. But then I see it’s much easier for us to get programs approved and our courses added to the curriculum without having to go through that extra bureaucratic process. That’s been an advantage and a good
thing for us. I didn’t think so at first. I thought it might be a bad move. I was wrong.

**Tomczyk:** It was a struggle in the beginning because there were so many services we had to create on our own. But yes, I think in the long run it has proven to be a good move.

**Collins:** As far as memories. I have one other memory to share with you. I can remember the first college world series that we went to. People think that we just went to Omaha this past couple of years ago as our first trip. We went - college baseball – went to our first series. It wasn’t NCAA; it was NAIA college world series and we went to Lubbock, Texas way back in the early 80s. We went to Lubbock, Texas. I’ll never forget that because our administrators flew out there – as they should – to see the games. And myself and Tom Cooke and Ballou Skinner we asked the college if we could take a college van at the time and just drive down there. We drove straight through to Lubbock, Texas.

**Tomczyk:** Oh, how many hours was that, Gene?

**Collins:** Well we did stop over for lunch but it took, I forget, about 20 hours. We drove all night.

**Tomczyk:** You took turns driving.

**Collins:** No, Tom Cooke drove the whole way.

**Tomczyk:** [*laughter*] I can see him insisting.

**Collins:** I was in the seat beside him. We drove out there. We stopped at Tom’s relatives - I forget whether his parents or what somewhere near Jackson, Mississippi for lunch. He kept driving and got to Lubbock, Texas about 4 in the morning. We enjoyed that. We won the first game. The second game we lost due to the official was just terrible. I’m just saying that [*smile*].

**Tomczyk:** It was a bad call.

**Collins:** Dr. Singleton got really upset with the officials and had a few unkind words to say to the officials.

**Tomczyk:** He knew his baseball.

**Collins:** He did. As they were getting ready to come back home after the loss, we had a supper that evening, a dinner. We were getting ready to take off the next day in our van and come back to Coastal. These other guys were going to fly back. I think Dr. Singleton felt sorry for us. He reached in his pocket and pulled out
several bills and handed them over to Tom and said “Here, take that right there and buy your gas and your meals on the way back”.

**Tomczyk**: Well it was kind of a very courageous trip. How many Coastal people were there? We were just coming off of being a commuter campus at that time.

**Collins**: Really the only ones there were the parents of the players and there were a few of the upper administrative people that were there.

**Tomczyk**: What a great show of support for you to bring. Now was John Vrooman the coach at that time?

**Collins**: No. Larry Carr.

**Tomczyk**: Larry Carr.

**Collins**: You know being on the intercollegiate athlete committee, again we got to know these coaches quite well. If they had a student that gave them trouble, I could call a coach and tell him about this student who was struggling or this person was doing something they shouldn’t be doing. The coach could give them some discipline. It was a good relationship.

**Tomczyk**: It really helped the athletes.

**Collins**: I can remember another time also; back in 1974 or 75. Do you remember the streaking fad?

**Tomczyk**: On my own college campus I do but I didn’t get here until after that.

**Collins**: We had a streaker.

**Tomczyk**: Here at Coastal?

**Collins**: Yes, yes we did. I was in the library at that time. The library at that time was in the Singleton Building the back part of the Singleton Building. I was sitting there in the library reading a book or something, I forgot what I was doing. And I look out of the corner of my eye and this guy comes running across the library – streaking through one door and out the back door.

**Tomczyk**: For the future viewers who don’t know what streaking is…it’s in the buff – running in your birthday suit?

**Collins**: That’s right; running in your birthday suit. The interesting thing was I knew this student quite well. He was a Vietnam veteran. I can’t remember his name. I was the Chair of the student affairs committee at that time and it was my responsibility to hand out some awards. We had an awards presentation kind of
like we have now – except it was basically for student affairs. This student won some service award I forgot what it was - and it was my responsibility to hand this out to this guy. I wanted to say something to him so bad, but I just didn’t. I had to hold my tongue. I wanted to crack a joke about it, but I didn’t. It was hard not to say something,

**Tomczyk:** Or even whisper something to him! You kept the decorum of the ceremony.

**Collins:** I had to do that. It was all I could do not to say something.

**Tomczyk:** Despite his pastime, he evidently was a good student. He got an award.

**Collins:** He was a good guy.

**Tomczyk:** We’ve had quite a few veterans who came back to school on the GI Bill. You know we are a military friendly campus now and it seems to me that we were even back then.

**Collins:** Well, yes. My first semester here I taught at the Myrtle Beach Air Force Base at night. Being the young guy in the department, I taught four classes during the daytime and left at night and taught another class over there. Because our regional campus had a campus over on the Myrtle Beach Air Force Base.

**Tomczyk:** An extension.

**Collins:** An extension. I got to know some of the military people quite well. I taught over there for a couple of years.

**Tomczyk:** In the documents that I have in the collection I see the air force base, the colonel there was very strong in making sure that instruction from Coastal was provided down there. They worked very hard with Dr. Singleton to have things available.

**Collins:** They made it as comfortable as possible to go down and teach them. Those guys would work all day and come in at night. I taught a class that started at 8 o’clock at night and ran until 10 at night. I would drive back to Conway, go home and have an 8’oclock class the next day. I did that for a couple of years. We had quite a number of airman that would come in and take courses here and taking them on the Air Force Base as well.

**Tomczyk:** Was there anything else? Those are all great stories. They are very helpful to me to fill in some of the gaps that I have in the collection. I appreciate your spending time.
Collins: Well there are probably others but I can’t remember them. I can’t remember what I had for breakfast.

Tomczyk: You did a very good job of remembering the dates and the people. So thank you, Gene, very much for spending time and talking about Coastal. I appreciate it.

Collins: You’re welcome.