Transcription of Interview with Dr. Deborah K. Conner

Interview Date: Oct 16, 2019, 4:30 pm

In the CCU Video Productions Studio, Hampton Hall

Introduction by Professor Andrew Busch:

Hello, this is the second year of Honors 306 Oral History in Action, an experiential learning course in the Honors College curriculum where students learn interviewing and research techniques and then interview people who made significant contributions to Coastal Carolina University. Our goal is to contribute to the broad community understanding of Coastal Carolina’s history and to strengthen ties between CCU and the Horry County community of which it is a part.

I am Andrew Busch (AB), Assistant Professor in the Honors College at CCU and the instructor of the class. The students doing today’s interview are Jacob Barndt (JB), a sophomore Intel major [Intelligence and national security], and Dean Wrobel (DW), a sophomore marine science major.

We are very pleased to welcome Dr. Debbie Conner, the Vice President of Student Affairs at Coastal Carolina. Welcome!

Debbie Conner: Thank you.

Andrew Busch: So I will start off with the first question and then Jacob and Dean will take over. So Dr. Conner, what brought you to Coastal Carolina?

DC: My husband and I actually came to the Grand Strand in 1993. My husband was in the golf industry and still is in the golf industry. He was offered a position here in the Myrtle Beach area. At the time, we were in Georgia, and I was teaching middle school and high school students and I was a coach. I knew I wanted to work in higher education, and so when the offer came for him to come to Myrtle Beach I had just read an article about someone who was the director of Alumni Affairs at Coastal Carolina University. So I was very interested and said, “Well, so let’s go.”

I’m going to go back to grad school when we move and I’m going to work in higher ed. So really, the first week we moved here, I made a phone call to the person that was featured in that magazine. I called her, had never met, went to lunch. About two weeks later, I was working on campus and enrolled at University of South Carolina in the graduate program. That was in the fall. Actually, I started that position in the fall of 94. So I came in ’93 but didn’t come to Coastal until the fall of ’94.

Jacob Barndt: Well, you mentioned your teaching experiences before coming to Coastal. Tell us about what classes you’ve taught and the kinds of teaching styles that you used.

DC: I have taught many different classes. So I started out as a high school social studies teacher. When I came to Coastal, the first class I actually taught was a University 110 class. I am still
teaching University 110. I teach in the College of Business. It is something that I am committed to do because in my position as Vice President for Student Affairs, I want to ensure that I am connected and understanding the issues and challenges that our freshmen are facing as they are coming into school. I am thrilled to have my 26 students in my FYE [Freshmen Year Experience] class. Some of them might say the same thing that they are thrilled to be there. We do a lot of different things. A lot of conversation, a lot of group work and we are very active in our class.

It is an 8am class but they cannot close their eyes because we are active and moving around and doing things in class. I do integration with some things on Moodle as well. That’s something I didn’t do years ago.

So definitely, our coursework and how we offer it has transformed over the last 25 years. I also have taught in the College of Business, multiple classes in the College of Business, including Organizational Management, Management and Organizational Behavior classes. Currently the last two semesters I have been teaching in the new Ph.D. program in the College of Education. So this semester I am teaching a Governance and Organization in Higher Education course and I have ten students in that class.

That class is a hybrid class so we do seminars a couple of Saturdays a month, and then the other class times we actually are meeting over Microsoft Team through videoconference. That is also something totally new for me last semester of offering a class that way. I enjoy it and my students enjoy it. I even have student-teacher meetings with individual students through Microsoft Team and we are able to video chat. So I can do that.

I do a lot of meetings with my students on Sunday evenings because they are full-time professionals and full-time students as well as myself. We meet whenever they are able to, so it’s really convenient and it’s a lot of fun.

JB: About that last point you made about new forms of teaching that you came across, how has instruction changed at Coastal since you’ve been here?

DC: Oh, my goodness. I remember when I first came to Coastal and I was actually in the graduate program at University of South Carolina I was getting my master’s in student personnel services in higher education. One of the courses I was able to take on this campus was a distance education class and we were connected to a class at the USC [University of South Carolina] campus and to actually talk to the professor you had to pick up a telephone and dial the number to talk to the professor at the other end. So that was quite interesting.

So now, to be able to - like in five minutes - I can go online and invite one of my students to a chat. We can have a meeting and I can actually show her documents over our Microsoft Team platform. It’s literally transformed. And the fact that we have such great educators in our Teaching and Learning Center [CeTeal]. They are helping faculty learn how to use all the equipment that we have available to us, how to implement it as far as how to use it in our coursework appropriately, the course design around those types of technologies, is really changed the way that most people do their work at Coastal.
Dean Wrobel: After we read your CV, we noticed that you served an impressive number of positions at CCU and climbed the ladder here very quickly. What enabled you to do this and what major challenges did you face along that journey?

DC: That’s really interesting [chuckle] I saw that question…. I was like; I have had some interesting roles at Coastal. I think that I just….you know, coming to Coastal in the fall of 1994, we were in a period of tremendous growth. So my first position was actually working in student affairs and student activities and working with fraternities and sororities and SGA [Student Government Association] and our Activities Board. A couple of years into that, the President’s Office actually reached out to me. They created a new position. I thought “Wow. Well, I might as well try that.” That started a really crazy ride for me starting with special events and then about every six months my position changed because we were just realizing all the things that needed to happen really within the administration of the institution that we had so dependent on the University of South Carolina to provide. We were growing at a tremendous rate so I think when I got here maybe 3,200 students and now it’s 10,600.

So, I really feel like a lot of the things that I have been able to experience is being in the right place at the right time. But I also prepared myself and I had people mentoring me along the way to encourage me to finish my master’s degree and to go on and pursue my Ph.D.

There have been many transitions in leadership etc. but I think for me the one thing that I have always said to the President or whoever I might report to, I am here to serve the students of Coastal Carolina University and our community. I am not necessarily here specifically to serve one single person who might be my supervisor at the time. I’m going to do what they ask me to and I’m going to make sure my goals align to theirs, but my real purpose for being here is my love for our students and this community. And that doesn’t change even if our leadership changes. So I think that’s one reason why I think I’ve been resilient in the work that I’ve done here is because of that commitment to our students.

JB: Through your positions here at Coastal, the various ones you’ve had, what has worked best for you in terms of management style?

DC: So I am a communicator. So I think communicating honestly to the people that are working with me with the expectations of commitment that I expect, with really ensuring that they are aware as much as possible of why decisions are being made, understanding how those impact them and how it might impact our students. I have been one always to make sure I am communicating as much information as I can. That I am also stopping to hear what other people have to say. And trying to make sure I am listening to people throughout the organization and not just the people who directly report to me but people who are across the institution and other areas and also within my own departments at different levels.

DW: As Vice President of Student Affairs in particular, what did you do to foster a sense of community among the students and between students and other stakeholders on campus?
DC: I think one of the biggest things that I try to do and I have to work at it intentionally and almost purposefully daily is, how can I create places and spaces for people to have conversations with each other? A couple of things that I do, recently I have a Student Presidents Council. So I invite all the club presidents to come, have dinner together. I invite the SGA [Student Government Association] President to kind of lead conversations about things that they would like to see improved at the institution. How they might communicate better as students with one another? How they can help support each other?

I also set up various meetings, breakfast meetings, lunch meetings, with groups of students with specific administrators on campus to talk about challenges that they see, support that they feel they’re not getting from the institution or how to better understand maybe certain policies the institution has. I work very diligently to create places where people can be together and have conversations and it seems like I usually do that around food because I love to eat. So you might as well have a good meal while you are chatting with each other. It really does break down a lot of barriers between people.

JB: You played a major role in increasing student access to health, well-being and recreation here at Coastal. Tell us about some of your accomplishments in this area.

DC: I will not claim any of those accomplishments. I would say that I have had amazing people working in those areas that have worked very hard. I think one thing that I learned very early is to hire the best people you can find that have expertise in those areas. So we have had just tremendous hires in all of those areas and being able to bring in young professionals in those areas that are bringing new ideas and new thoughts, new things that they have learned in their graduate programs in recent years to really transform the types of things that we are doing. I would say the collective successes that are happening are one from student voices that involved a lot of student mentors, a lot of peer educators.

Students who are giving us feedback on what students need. And then also having young professionals and seasoned professionals that can lead their staff to actually take what they are hearing and move it towards actual goals that they can achieve.

Just some of the newest things: I think about with our outdoor recreation center the number of outdoor programs that we are able to involve students in. It hasn’t been announced but it will be announced in the next week or so. We will be recognized as a silver award winner as a bicycle-friendly university which is a tremendous award. Only a couple of other institutions in the state have received that silver status. I think maybe only one other one. We’ve been at the bronze status for a while. But that’s been a commitment from students, from our staff, educating students about sustainability, why they should be riding bicycles. Our bike share program is actually one of the largest in the country for students. We are a model program. Other institutions come here to see how we do things, and that’s kind of a cool thing.

DW: Well, we noticed that Coastal has grown tremendously during your time here, obviously physically as well as institutionally. Tell us about how Coastal’s campus has grown so rapidly and your role in facilitating that.
**DC:** I don’t know that I facilitated any of the growth. I feel like I literally sat down and put on a seatbelt like I got in a roller coaster and I have just been here for the ride. But managing that growth and ensuring that students are successful and faculty and staff are successful along the way; I feel like I have played a part in that.

I think Coastal was destined in a way to be the institution that it is becoming for so many different reasons: the reason it was founded, the purposes of which it was founded, and then just our location, the programs that we offer, the faculty that we attracted as an undergraduate research institution. I don’t know that I have played any particular part in that exponential growth but it has been really fun to have a ringside seat and to participate in small ways in making sure that we are able to scale up the things that we’ve been doing for our students to be successful.

**DW:** I have one question. You were talking about bringing in younger faculty. As one of the newer research institutions in the state for sure, do you think that’s a big part in the rapid growth of Coastal, giving us an alternative from more established research institutions?

**DC:** I think so and I think that students that are looking at colleges now are very discerning. Students are looking for a place that’s going to add value. I think when a person is looking at Coastal Carolina University, and they are seeing the types of experiences offered at such as really a mid-sized institution, and the engagement of the faculty with students in research, the engagement of students with one another, with the commitment of our staff that we have. To me it’s an easy relationship to build, that Coastal adds value through the human resources that we provide and that’s what keeps students here.

**JB:** It’s not every day that you see a school, a college in a sense, grow as fast as Coastal has over the last few decades. What challenges have you faced during this process in raising money for Coastal?

**DC:** Oh, gosh, so raising money for Coastal, and I would say for Student Affairs specifically, is a challenge because it is easy to relate academic missions and departments to their graduates and their alumni. It’s a very unique donor who decides to specifically support a program within Student Affairs. Say that they want to support our food pantry, someone who might want to support our benevolence fund for students that are in emergency situations. So usually, the folks that would donate in those types of programs are alumni or parents.

Very few, kind of outside businesses, like you might have the College of Business could attract a business that might not have a direct relationship with the institution. But we are specifically dependent on alumni, and parents of our students and graduates. I think that’s the biggest challenge is that we are still fairly young institution, so being able to find those people with the resources and connecting them to a passion they may have is the critical part. We have a great Office of Philanthropy and they work diligently to identify folks that can help support us. I meet weekly with our Philanthropy Officer for our area and so we are always looking for ways to support specifically student programs and success within Student Affairs.
DW: We noticed you were quite successful in increasing student retention, which is definitely one of the major long-term goals at Coastal. Why is retention such a challenge for Coastal and what strategies did you use to promote retention successfully?

DC: If I had the answer to the question “Why is retention a challenge for Coastal”, then I would like be the queen of the world. I would have like gold coins and I could retire now. I don’t have the specific answer to that question, but we have spent a lot of time and energy around that and I can tell you we made very big strides over the past years. Myself, a couple of our academic deans and some others on campus work collectively together to really dig through what information do we have. What do we know about our students? What do our students need to be successful?

We have found things that are helpful to our students to help them be successful to stay. I think that nationally this is a very important conversation on the national stage. There are a lot of programs out there and groups working toward ensuring completion, college completion. I know for us we are going to be celebrating November 8th [2019] is the First Generation College Celebration Day, a national celebration of first generation students. We are going to start doing more to recognize our first generation students at Coastal. They tend to come into college more prepared than their peers but they don’t graduate in the same numbers as their peers. So we are going to be focusing on how we can better support special populations of students that we see on our campus that are well prepared but somewhere we are missing the support services and other things they might need to make sure that they are finishing.

JB: So tell us about Chant Life and why you created it?

DC: Oh, I love Chant Life. Several years ago, I had heard a lot of frustration from academic departments specifically about their FYE [Freshmen Year Experience] classes and that they were tired of having to schedule all these different departments to come in from Student Affairs to give information to their students. I was also concerned with other statistics that we were seeing across the campus.

So I sent a group of folks that work for me to a conference. It was actually a shared conference. It was an alcohol and other drug conference, it was a wellness conference and a mental health conference. I said I want the four of you to go and I want you to come back with something that you think could be scaled and used at Coastal Carolina University that can impact the decisions students are making on our campus.

The group came back and they kind of had something that they thought might work, but they didn’t think it would quite fit here. So they presented me all the material. They said this university is going to be offering a full one-day conference –at my the conference that I attend. Maybe you should go check this out. So I went. I think it was UC-Santa Barbara. I saw what they were doing there. I was like, “We could do this but it’s going to have to be adapted to our type of institution.” We were able to successful do that and had been able to implement Chant Life.

We did a test of Chant Life with the Edwards College our first year and did some assessment and found that students were receiving and understanding the information that we were sharing. So
we implemented it university-wide. We just went through a new transition with Chant Life this past year where it was actually offered not only in the FYE [Freshmen Year Experience] classes but it was offered during our CINO [Coastal Is Number One] Tide Welcome Week so students were participating in it prior to classes starting. That was really successful as well.

**DW:** You were also tasked with initiating sustainability programs in the residence halls. Tell us how you accomplished that and why it was so important?

**DC:** I am amazed at really where our sustainability programs have come since we initiated some small programs several years ago. I think it was really the buy in of the staff really committed to wanting to teach students in their living space how they can be more friendly to our environment.

The programs of sustainability specifically in the residence halls have transformed over the last couple of years even more so. I think it was really commitment from staff. They were really committed to making it work, committed to educating students. And then really the university embraced sustainability at a larger level, hired our first sustainability person and now I think we have had a sustainability coordinator and director maybe for eight or nine years now. We have really come a long way in our sustainability.

Just to be on other college campuses, as I visit other campuses and see what they are doing. Three years ago, we were way behind on what other campuses were doing and now when I walk around and see our bins. There are not just trash bins. It explains what goes in which bin to recycle. We are catching up. I still think we’ve got more things that we could be doing but we are doing a phenomenal job on our campus.

**JB:** Of the various services that you have helped create at Coastal, one of which is the multicultural student services, why did you help develop this office?

**DC:** The multicultural student services office, I didn’t actually create that office. That office was serving students for a period of time before I was involved. But I worked with that office for many years in shifting what we were doing. I think the multicultural student services role was created with Pat Singleton-Young when she was working in student affairs. She served in multiple roles and one of those roles was working as the Director of Multicultural Student Services. She was an office of one for a really long time.

It’s one of those great things to see Coastal committed and doing what they need to do to help students succeed. Coastal understood and knew that we needed to make a bigger commitment to students of underrepresented populations on our campus. They were able to do that through the establishment of other positions in that office, including a program coordinator and an assistant director. The things that they now are accomplishing just makes me so proud of our institution. But I think it’s important even with an office like that, I think every time I am meeting with my staff I have to reiterate the fact that the work of multicultural student services and intercultural and inclusion student services is the job of every person that works at this institution. It is not the job of that one office. It is everybody’s job. I think oftentimes when you have an office with a name on it and people think, “Oh, they can take care of that.” But that’s not the case. It is
everybody’s job. I think that’s one of the challenges is to still make sure that people own that and everybody knows it is all of our responsibilities.

**DW:** Earlier in your career, how did you make Coastal more technologically savvy and integrate social media into campus life?

**DC:** Oh, my gosh. I just remember. We have gone through so many interesting social media reiterations. It continues to change, right? I can’t keep up with it anymore. I had a couple of years I thought I’m going to get all the Twitter followers. And then it’s like - oh, nobody is on Twitter anymore. Then I’m going get Snap Chat, Instagram, whatever it is. I think those platforms will continue to change. I think it’s important that we are paying attention to what our students are paying attention to.

I think we have shifted many times over the years in our infrastructure on campus to support students. I remember the shifts that we made in the residence halls from making sure that everybody had their wires to plug in their computers in their residence hall rooms, to going through and making sure that we had wireless internet in all those residence hall rooms, and then replacing that wireless internet with a new wireless internet.

I think we will continue to shift, to make sure that people have what they need, to have access to information. Just the thoughts of when we realized – oh my goodness - we need to make sure we have wireless availability on Prince Lawn and in the Football Stadium and other locations that maybe we had not thought about before.

So really investing. It’s really expensive to support technology on a college campus, and so making sure the institution is committed to that. We have got a Technology Council now that formally works as a group to identify where we need to be investing our funds in future technology. It’s fun to be part of that group and be part of that conversation. So that’s always going to be changing.

**DW:** As a side question, do you think like Coastal’s social media presence online has kind of increased or maybe decreased, or affected freshman retention or freshman coming to Coastal?

**DC:** I think some of the negative social media. I think we have a great positive social media presence. But I also would be the first to say that people put stupid things on social media as well, right? I think there have been some things in the past. I have been right in the middle of the sandstorm when it has happened when really inappropriate things have been posted. That is hard to recover from. I don’t know. When I see students at events and they are videoing and I’m thinking, “OK, you are putting this on their Snap story.” I think, “Do you really want that on your Snap story?” I think having more education for students.

Just in the last couple of weeks, I’ve been part of a group that has updated our social media policy for campus. So making sure that we are putting out also best practices for social media for faculty and staff who now find themselves managing social media channels, but also for students to know, hey, this is kind of a best practice and this is what you should be aware of.

**JB:** On a slightly different note, tell us about your Amistad visit.
**DC:** Oh, the Amistad. I saw that question and I was like oh, why did they wait for that until the end?

That was back in the 90s, I mean that was a long time ago, probably twenty years ago that that happened.

Our President at the time had seen the story of the Amistad on Good Morning, America [*a news program on the ABC television channel*]. He was totally inspired so he showed up on Monday and he said, “Debbie, call those people, find them and bring that ship to South Carolina.” I was like “OK”. I called the folks with Amistad America at that time and said, “My boss saw the ship. We would like to see about bringing the ship to South Carolina, maybe Georgetown”, ‘cause I’m thinking what port is closest to us. They said “We will never come to South Carolina” and they hung up on me. So I went in his office and said, “Sir, they are not going to come to South Carolina.” He said, “Why?” I said, “We fly the Confederate flag at our Statehouse and the message of the Amistad is the opposite of that. It’s about reconciliation and recognizing our past and moving beyond it.”

And he said, “That is exactly why they need to come.” He was really fired up on that. He worked. He wrote a letter and they called us and said ‘OK maybe we might talk to you about this.” Our proposal was to bring the ship and we can do education around your ship’s visit. And we can have a theme around that, which we propose would be Roots and Reconciliation. For people to be able to recognize the roots of our area, many of whom had come from Africa as slaves and for there to be opportunity for our community to have conversations around that history and to try to move past it.

So they did come. They were here for two weeks. I don’t think I slept for two weeks. I probably didn’t sleep for a month. We had some amazing conversations. There were a lot of tears from community members as they talked about their histories, their families’ histories, how they had been challenged to operating invisibly in regards to their family histories. It was a phenomenal experience.

When the ship left port from Georgetown [*South Carolina*] to head to Savannah, Georgia, I actually became a crewmember. So I ended up as a volunteer crewmember. It is a tall ship. That was a great experience for me to be a crewmember on a tall ship. But it’s a tall ship with a message and a conversation through the historical context of the actual Amistad ship and the Supreme Court case that followed that. That declared that the Africans who were on board were actually citizens of Africa; they weren’t slaves.

**DW:** Now on a more broader note, the role of women in the professional world has changed drastically during your time here. How has the campus climate as well as your role as a leader changed during your time here?

**DC:** Wow, the demographic, and I was actually looking at demographics of university faculty just in my class that I teach in my Governance in Higher Education class. Looking at not only the demographics of faculty, part time faculty, adjunct faculty and tenure track faculty, but also looking at the demographics of our administration and boards. I have seen just a tremendous
transformation really in the last couple of years in regards to a more diverse faculty and specifically the role of women in the faculty and also within the administration. On the President’s Cabinet, I am not the only female there. That’s a really great thing to see. There are a lot of diverse identities at that table.

Are we representative of our student populations still? Not quite. Much better than we were five, six years ago. Very different representation. I think that is something we still need to work on as an institution, but I have seen great [strides]. Looking at our academic deans, there are a lot of women in those roles at this institution. So I was just on the phone with our dean of Wall College of Business, Barb Ritter, just a little while ago and thinking, who would have thought we would have a female dean of our Business College, of our Honors College. So it is exciting. Of our Edwards College of Humanities and Fine Arts. It’s great to see the changing demographic but not just in gender identity, but also other identities including race. It’s good to see we are diversifying.

**JB:** What has been one of your most rewarding experiences here at Coastal and why would you say so?

**DC:** Gosh, there are so many that I could speak to. But the one when I talk to families, I usually…. There are so many. Like today was a wonderful day. My student employee brought me a gift just because she wanted me to know how much she cared for me. How great. Like who does that, right? That was so touching to me.

I think every year the best experience I have is sitting on the stage at graduation and to see the students that I have cried with, that I have supported, that have supported me, walking across that stage. I can count on one hand the commencements that I have missed in my 25 years, maybe two. I never miss commencement. To see those students walk across the stage. It’s funny because I am so happy, that I have to go rest because my face hurts because I’ve been smiling the whole two hours. For me that is the whole reason I’m here. So how would I miss that? It drives my husband crazy. He’s like, “It’s only a grad… you’re sitting through another commencement?” Oh, yes, I can’t wait because it is for that student. That’s their only commencement, right?

Maybe I’ve been on a Commencement stage or participated in 40 or 50 more commencements over the years and every one is special because it is special for that family and for that student. I would say that is kind of my culminating happy place. And now we get to do that three times a year. I get to do that in December, a few times. I get to do that in May several times and I get to do that in August. It really gives me a check for what my why is and my why is our students.

**DW:** Now since you’ve come to Coastal, broadly, how has CCU changed?

**DC:** Oh my goodness. So, the first time I came on this campus I actually was driving around the campus and the Wall Building had just opened. I went to the end of the pavement and there was gravel. I was like “Well, that’s a really nice building over there.’ So I just kept going on the gravel road to the Wall building to see what that was all about.
So my first time on this campus was a gravel road around the Wall building. So we only had pavement basically to where the Student Union is and it stopped. The rest was gravel. So the physical plant of this institution [changed]…

I remember how frustrated we were back in the early 90s when we knew our population was growing but we couldn’t get any money from the State to invest in more classroom buildings. We wanted a new Edwards, the Humanities Building. We wanted a new Science Building and we couldn’t get the State to give us the money for those buildings.

So when the people of Horry County voted for the penny tax, that to me is what transformed this institution. It was really the decision of the people of this county to allow us to meet the needs of our students and to do that through capital projects. That’s the biggest transformation. Most of the buildings that you see, the renovations that have happened have all been paid by the citizens of our county. That is very rare. That doesn’t happen I don’t think anywhere else in the country.

**JB:** To finish off, is there anything else you’d like to add, Dr. Conner?

**DC:** I don’t think so. I think I’ve said a lot [laughter]. It’s been great to spend time with you all and speak with you about just memories. There is a lot that could be said, but I mean if you’ve got about five hours one day we can sit down and chat some more.

**AB:** Well, Dr. Conner I’d like to thank you once again for being so kind and sharing some of your memories of Coastal with us. As a newer professor here, I’m really just amazed at how much you’ve done here on your time. It’s inspiring for me. We also like to thank you for all you’ve done for the University. We really wish you well in your future here and elsewhere. Yes, wonderful. So thanks so much.

**DC:** Well, thanks for having me.

**AB:** You’re welcome.

**JB, DW:** Thank you.