

Antoinette “Toni” Liston, International Student Adviser at SIUE
Transcript of interview for the History of SIUE Oral History Project
Interviewed by Ellen Nore-Nordhauser
April 7, 2006

Ellen Nore [EN]: Okay, it's Friday, April 7th, 2006. This is Ellen Nore, and I'm interviewing Toni Liston for the history of SIUE. So usually start out by asking how you happen to come to work at SIUE and how your jobs have changed over the years when you came, and...

Toni Liston [TL]: Alright. I came in November of '86.

EN: Okay.

TL: I was previously the Assistant Director of International Programs at Northern Illinois University, where there what we had over 1000, about 1000 internationals. And I came here for two reasons. Um, number one, I would have been the main person, which had a salary difference. And number two, the numbers of students at Northern getting up to 1000 um, was eliminating the or inhibiting the ability ah, for a personal interaction with the students.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: So, I think at the time, here, we had around 200 [TL coughs]. And it allowed a lot more interaction.

EN: And who was doing this job before you? Or was it?

TL: Kathryn Kumler.

EN: Oh, yes.

TL: Kathryn Kumler, whom I knew very well from um, our professional association called NAFSA, the Association of International Educators. Ah, Katherine and I were both on our regional leadership team. And Katherine had recently been chair of our three-state region. So, [EN coughs] I knew both Catherine and her husband very well.

EN: Okay. And how, what is the, what are the words for the acronym of NAFSA?

TL: It actually stands for National Association of Foreign Student Affairs.

EN: Okay.

TL: Now, they just refer to it as NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

EN: Okay. Okay.

TL: Drives ya' nuts.

EN: Okay. Good. Um, so, how did? Did you make changes in the office when you came?

TL: Ah, well, when I immediately came, there was I made some changes we had um... They had graduate, Katherine, when Katherine had left, there been about six months without an official advisor full time. And, frankly, the office have been weren't run with being run at that time, ah, by graduate assistants until I came. The- Katherine had put a high emphasis at that time on the academic advisement.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Of international students and had left the legal processing of legal forms and legal information a lot to the graduate students, graduate assistants. Um so, I sort of switch the emphasis, I put a higher emphasis on the assistance with the legal issues, um, as opposed to the academic advisement.

EN: Okay. Mm-hmm.

TL: And a year or two afterwards, the academic advisement of the undergraduates went to the advisement office.

EN: Mm-hmm. So, they, people just go to regular advisors when they're international?

TL: For the academic. Yes.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: And I think ah, it's very difficult to be um, well, well versed in all areas in the legal things. We're getting already. We're getting very complicated.

EN: Mm-hmm. Right.

TL: And I just felt more comfortable doing the legal issues myself rather than having grad students do it.

EN: Mm-hmm. Right. Oh, that's what's really interesting to know about your professional background. And um, I wonder um, how has, how have the composition of our international students changed over the years?

TL: Well, it goes the, when I, when I first came here, there were about an equal number of Pakistanis and Indians, maybe about 20-25 of each.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Um, and there was a good number of um, Chinese students starting to come in. At that time. We were having difficulty getting them out of China. There was very little money that they had to survive. Ha, I can remember one student arriving from China with \$25 in a shoe, in the sole of a shoe, and that was...

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: ...all he came with. And um, so we started some different procedures...

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: ...to deal with that. Mark. For a while, we had required deposits from people from certain countries to be sure they had money when they came. Another thing we did was ah, for students that were depending on grad, their graduate assistantships to support them, we set up ah, an advanced payment program. So, in a brand new graduate assistant arrived from out of country, we had a way to give them a loan, which they paid off as soon as they got their first paycheck, which was usually about six weeks later. Um, but things have changed greatly in the last six years.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Naturally, you see, you see, population trends will change.

EN: Yes.

TL: Now we have many more Indians, um, close to 200. Ah, for a while, we had a large number of our goodly number of Turkish students.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Now our numbers of African students are growing.

EN: Good.

TL: The International population is usually a reflection of world affairs. We can now see with the Saudi government starting to want to build its- its better relations with the US population in general. Now, they're going to be starting to send 1000s of Saudi students over.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Starting this year, um for school.

EN: Well, quite a few come to SIU.

TL: We don't know yet?

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: They because they have to go to English programs first.

EN: Okay.

TL: But they're right in that you have it with each different influx of students, you have different cultural issues, um, and different concerns.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And you have to be careful, too. Um, not only watch the trends, but to be sure you keep a balance, because one change in the world situation, and whammo, you can have lost your biggest group of students.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: So, ah, in admissions, we have to watch those trends.

EN: Mm-hmm. [Pause] How did, um, how did 911 affect your work?

TL: Um. [TL and EN laugh] Where to begin?

EN: Yes.

TL: There I quit, I quit counting.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: There were many laws and legislative policy changes after 911. I stopped counting after 35.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: And that's including, you know, just letters out from the government suggesting whatever but they um, the first year or so it was very tense with population, both with the students, international students and campus. The Muslim students, ah, now are very few in number. And they also ah, have tended to be extremely, um, invisible.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: They're staying very low-key and trying to stay out of the limelight.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And um, they've had, they've had to, they had it- Muslims from certain countries had to go in and get fingerprinted.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: Had to, other, all kinds of special check-ins, special check-outs.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: The FBI had come on campus and have done interviewing. Um, it was a very unsettling time for them, for the Muslim students in particular.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Frightening. And um, but I have to say that um, when they came, the FBI was very um, sensitive. We didn't find, we found them to be very ah, gracious in working with the students.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: It wasn't a kind of a scare technique or anything like that.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Which, which we were grateful for. And then, um, this was is our third year going now on the computer reporting system which is called SEVIS.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Which stands for Student and Exchange Visitor Information System. I find it um, while, such a system was necessary and needed for many years, I found it, I found it, I find it to be draconian.

EN: Okay. TL: I call it; instead, I say SEVIS stands for Satan's Extremely Vexing Intrusion into Schools [EN laughs].

EN: Okay. [Both laugh]

TL: The system is set up. So that we, if a, if an international student, were not attending school with the government would be notified immediately or if they...

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: ...change their addresses, this is good.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: What is bad about it is they are given um, only one time, one semester, during their academic degree, in which they can go below a full course load.

EN: Oh. I see.

TL: Um, and limited excuses for it.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: And this is really unrealistic. You can have class scheduling problems or um, whatever, you know, there are many reasons.

EN: Yes.

TL: One might have, even, for example, you might be able to set the way courses are offered, a graduate student might want to take six, one term, and six the next instead of nine one. Yes, and and so.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: It's, and three, the next, so it doesn't make, it doesn't allow for um...

EN: Yeah.

TL: Reasonable...

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: ...flexibility with academia.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: It also frustrates me extremely in that um, like now they're talking about the amnesty program for illegal aliens [EN sighs]. And this happened in 80s, 1986. And so here, I can have international students that um, someone might have to drop one course, two semesters in a row because daddy's business at home is having trouble.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And he's reported as illegal and may be told to leave the country. And he won't have a resource where someone who has come in illegally and been here may have a path to citizenship. So it's a very hard thing to deal with and a difficult pill to swallow.

EN: Uh-huh. You must deal with angry people all the time.

TL: Well.

EN: Or frustrated.

TL: Frustrated, I'd say not angry.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: The students know when they come in that there are a lot of rules and regulations for them to follow.

EN: Okay.

TL: And fortunately, we've got such a good relationship with the students. They- they know and trust this office...

EN: Mm-hmm. Good.

TL: ...to be dealing in their best interest. And um, they know they will get honesty and, and assistance here.

EN: Do you have anything else to say about your job and, and...?

TL: Well, we talked about the legal things and how things were set up. I'd like to say during in the years 10 years ago, we were moved under Student Affairs.

EN: And that makes sense.

TL: And we've had a lot more financial support and moral support in that time. Before, we were into inky dinky cell-like-offices with mismatched equipment.

EN: Oh.

TL: We didn't even really have desks; you had to sit up credenzas.

EN: [EN laughs] Oh, dear.

TL: And now and so now we have very lovely offices and adequate staffing.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: So it's- the university has definitely grown in its internationalization.

EN: Oh, that's great.

TL: So, I'm proud to have been a part of that growth.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: We have a week-long orientation program each term, and besides just instructing the students, it sets up a bond, a trust. And the personal issues are what come out as the most important. Something as simple as picking them up from the airport and seeing that they have initial food needs.

EN: Uh-huh. Yes.

TL: Yeah, is- it sets the tone.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: For for um, what they feel about the community and how comfortable and whether they trust you.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And so our philosophy has always been that our first concern is the student's survival needs.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And secondly, it's the um, legal issues.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: So, we feel it is our duty to act as the international students' ombudsman.

EN: Mm-hmm. Great.

TL: Okay.

EN: Fine. Now, I want to ask you about your part in organizing the Staff Union.

TL: Okay.

EN: And and did you have a union at Northern?

TL: No.

EN: No.

TL: No, we didn't. The professional staff wasn't unionized.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: That was much harder to too. Now I will, it was much harder to organize. It was less safe to organize, organize the clerical staff had, um, Civil Service to protect them. The faculty tenure.

EN: Yes.

TL: Professional staff didn't have anything.

EN: Uh-huh. Great.

TL: And so, I think it was a good. The other thing, our members who went through the initial training that we did for people, I didn't do bargaining.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: But they gave a bargaining training session.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: The Union did. And I was impressed because it was all- the training was all done on a win-win for both sides.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: As opposed to a confrontational training.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: Now, whether that has materialized into actuality, I don't know. [EN laughs] But that was that was the goal. And the thing I was extremely impressed about at the time was the strength of the women from the East St. Louis campus that were paid so little in the daycare end.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: And I remember going out with John Drueke. And or Pat Murphy. And um, we would do-go to East St. Louis, once a month for ah, breakfast with the folks from East St. Louis.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And it was great breakfast. [TL and EN laugh] But in an effort, this was in an effort to be sure we didn't- weren't coming from two different ends.

EN: Yeah.

TL: Make sure kept together.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: But my position was taken out of the Union, maybe a year and a half, two years after that.

EN: Oh, 1989.

TL: Mm-hmm.

EN: That's interesting because that eventually happened to John Drueke, too.

TL: That is not uncommon.

EN: Yeah. Okay. That's interesting. Well, when you came in 1986, who were you under?

TL: Uh, Dick [Richard] Dremuk.

EN: Oh.

TL: Yeah. You talked to other people?

EN: Yeah.

TL: Yeah, Dick was the director of um, well, it's quite um, Admissions and Retention, I believe was the title.

EN: Okay.

TL: And he did have some understanding of international students because I believe both he and his wife started out in international admissions.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: But um, when Nancy Belck came, we were moved over to, under Student Affairs.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And um, I believe it was a much more student-friendly um, environment.

EN: Yes, that makes so much sense.

TL: Mm-hmm.

EN: Well, can you comment on the different administrations with whom you worked in your...

TL: Well.

EN: You started with ah, Lazerson and then Nancy Belck [TL laughs] and David Werner.

TL: Um.

EN: You don't have to comment if you don't want to.

TL: Well, well, frankly. Um, things weren't very, things, I really it hasn't been bad under and under any- I mean...

EN: Okay.

TL: I mean every every administration has their their um, idiosyncrasies.

EN: Okay.

TL: I- I think that for a while we went much more um, I think it was more business-oriented. Let, under under Dremuk I felt it, which was part, mostly under Lazerson that was that was um, a little less personal touch.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: Okay. I think Nancy Belck brought in a much more personal ah, warmth and touch. Um under under ah, Dr. Warner, I think he had a long history and respect from being here for so long.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: I think things went fairly smoothly. Um, I do believe I noticed a difference after 911.

EN: Uh huh.

TL: And I think that was...

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: ...common, not only on our campus administration at the top, but throughout the country. Understandably so.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: I think there was a um, all of us had a defensive...

EN: Yes.

TL: A defensive um, attitude and and worrisome attitude, which would have been weird if we didn't.

EN: Yes.

TL: Okay. And um, under our current administration, it really, it seems fine, but it hasn't been long enough for me to get a feel.

EN: Yes. Right.

TL: Right.

EN: Okay. Okay. Well, the other thing I wanted to ask you about is your you've been very active in different campus um, manifestations, political things, like being against the War in Iraq, and.

TL: I don't keep my mouth closed.

EN: Uh-huh. I know, when you, and I've always admired your courage.

TL: [TL laughs] Gets you in trouble.

EN: It does get you in trouble? Do you get reprimanded for that by your?

TL: No, no, I haven't been that's, but it's um, but you have um, if you have a big mouth like I do, sometimes you put your foot in it.

EN: Uh-huh. [EN and TL laugh]

TL: You know.

EN: Yeah.

TL: But I'm um, the vast majority of international students are, like they are not very fond of this current administration.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: So, um, which is an extremely conservative way of me to say it. [TL laughs] And so I haven't had um, I'm surrounded by people that think the same.

EN: Mm-hmm. Okay.

TL: No. And I'm retiring in three weeks.

EN: You are?

TL: And I plan to be extremely active politically.

EN: Good. Who? Do you, have you trained someone to replace you? Are you on a search right now? Or?

TL: No, they aren't. They're restructuring the office. And right now, I have one professional assistant and a secretary for a half-time Secretary three grad assistant.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: And what they're doing is they're restructuring. And Debbie, the Secretary four, she's been here for 10 years.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And she's going to be up to a professional staff position, justifiably so.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: So, and Ron Schaefer ah, faculty is the, ah, to be the director over both this office and study abroad.

EN: Oh. Okay.

TL: So the International Programs, um, and it's always good to have a faculty member in charge because of um, power, and influence on campus.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: And so Debbie's been trained for 10 years, particularly in the service reporting system. And Ali's been trained for five years in the immigration issues. So I'm pretty confident that this restruct - that they're going to do well

EN: Good.

TL: I mean, if I brainwashed him for five to 10 years and my way of thinking, if I had if I haven't done a good job training them, that should follow that would be my fault.

EN: Okay.

TL: Why we. We like ah Ali. We think he's been great.

EN: He's so great.

TL: Yeah. So, anything else about the university just to conclude.

EN: No, I want to make, I want to make one final comment on that is on the town gown.

TL: Yes.

EN: Um, thing for ever since when I came here, they had a group called the IHP, the International Hospitality Program.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: And these were the folks that were the friends to the international students, they call them host families. This wasn't for living with them.

EN: Mm-hmm.

TL: But for sort of adopting them as as...

EN: Yes.

TL: ...friends.

EN: Yes.

TL: And we've got people in that organization, such as Doris Calvillo [phonetic] and Joyce and John Schrader that have been here since before I came, and people like the Stanley's who go to every single thing, every single student function on campus.

EN: Uh-huh.

TL: So, this office has also, I think, done a good job of working with the community, in that and in addressing some of the personal needs of the students as opposed to only the academic.

EN: Yes. Okay.

TL: Alrighty.

EN: Alright. Thank you very much. [Recording ends]