

Interviewee: Moser, Rita; Mercier, Denise
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Sellers: Rita, tell me how the idea first came about, who was involved in it, what kind of talks were going on, and some dates.

Moser: I have in front of me a memorandum dated April 27, 1993, and it's to Jon Dalton, who was then Vice President for Student Affairs, Associate VP Sherrill Ragans, myself, Dean Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, and Dean Larry Abele, from Bob Glidden, who was then Provost. He's thanking us for our participation in a meeting the week before to discuss the prospect of a residential college idea at FSU. It was as a result of that that a group came together to begin planning for what would become the Bryan learning community. Bryan was being renovated after being used by administrative offices for decades. It reopened in August of 1997, and when it reopened, the Bryan program was in place.

Sellers: What exactly was the intent of the Bryan program?

Moser: Well, of course, the role of the committee was to figure out what should be the emphasis. The group came to the belief that it should be a program that would help students make the transition to a large research institution; that it would help them see the resources that were available to them here that would not be available if they were in a non-research institution; help them get acclimated to a very large university; and at the same time, bring them into much closer relationships with faculty members as they began their transition to Florida State.

Sellers: Only students living in Bryan Hall would be part of this?

Moser: That's correct.

Sellers: What level were the students? Were they all to be freshmen?

Moser: They were first-time-in-college freshmen who started that August. They could live there for two semesters. After the year was up, they needed to vacate to make room for the next group of first-years. Each fall they had a colloquium on a Monday night, and they could sign up to take courses that were being offered in a small 22-capacity classroom on the top floor of Bryan. And in the second semester, the idea was that they could again take classes in the classroom, but they could also have a mentoring opportunity to work closely with a faculty member in an area of interest to both the faculty member and the students.

Sellers: How were the students selected? Did they have to make special application?

And how did they find out that the program existed?

Moser: There was promotional information that went out to them; it was included in the housing application information. There was a special brochure that went out to the applicants as well. In the early years, we had probably over 1,200 applications for 128 spaces in the building, so it was very competitive, obviously. At the time, other than honors housing, which was located in Landis, it was the only special program available of its kind. Since then we've had others develop. It was very competitive. There was a committee of people that was comprised of faculty, staff, and students who served as the readers and evaluated the essays that the students wrote. We had a formula for scoring that would give the places in the hall to the people who scored highest on their essay application.

Sellers: Of the 128 spaces, is that single rooms?

Moser: No. Most of the rooms over there are doubles, and there are three resident assistants over there as well. So there are actually 131 spaces, but 128 were available to the incoming freshmen.

Sellers: When the information for it went out in the housing applications – you said originally you had 1,200 or so students coming back in. What was the information that was intriguing to them? How were the brochures written or —?

Moser: Well, it was a small building – 128 students; it's the smallest one we have on campus. I think that's attractive. It was a brand new building inside, so the conditions of the building were very attractive to students. Its location is wonderful, being right across from Westcott in the oldest part of the campus. And I think what struck me the first few years reading essays was that many of the students who were applying were coming from small private high schools, and I think the notion of coming to a campus of 40,000 students could be pretty daunting. So having an opportunity to be in a small place, having access to regular faculty members, actually taking classes where you could just roll out of bed and put your slippers on and go down the hall to class was very attractive on a number of levels for them.

Sellers: What kind of essays were they asked to write?

Moser: I would have to look back to the original ones, and I'm not sure I have copies of those (I think I probably do somewhere in their folders). But I think basically we were asking what the program could do for them, what they could contribute to the program and the community. Then they were asked to give us some examples of their leadership opportunities that they had taken advantage of in high school.

Sellers: So even though you were looking for students who might be a little bit hesitant to enmesh themselves in a huge campus community, you were still looking for leadership capabilities rather than kids who needed some extra push or coddling? Is that correct?

Moser: We were looking for — we didn't look at test scores or high school GPA; none of that was considered. But we were looking for students who gave evidence that they really wanted to be active learners and communicate in this interactional community with faculty and discuss academic concerns with other students.

Sellers: Were there any problems? There was an honors program that was sort of similar to this at the time. Was there the possibility of a conflict?

Moser: We avoided that by saying that there would be no overlap. Honors had always had a Monday night colloquium, so Bryan had a Monday night program. And they were required of participants, so that virtually ensured that that wouldn't happen. So yes, some students probably had to make a decision whether they wanted to be part of honors or part of Bryan, but that was a decision they could make at the outset and decide where they wanted to be.

Sellers: Was there ever any effort to convince students one way or the other that they should be in Bryan rather than honors, or was that not an involvement of the committee? Was that something that the students decided on their own?

Moser: I'm not aware, but if they called a certain office — for example, Bryan had a grad assistant — actually, she may have been an undergraduate student, Victoria, who worked with George Weaver, the first director — and I would imagine that if they called her or if they called the honors program, they would discuss what they could expect with those programs to help a student make a decision, but I'm not aware of any convincing that people tried to do to get them to select one or the other.

Sellers: So you weren't competing.

Moser: No, we really weren't. And that was a really intentional thing. I think Bruce Bickley was over the honors program at the time, and we invited him in to the committee meetings, to some of them, to share what we were doing, so that we would avoid having those kinds of conflicts.

Sellers: So you're looking for about 60 students to start with?

Moser: No, it was the whole building.

Sellers: Oh, 128 all together. Right, I'm sorry.

Moser: Each year.

Sellers: 1995 was the first year?

Moser: '97. That's when the building reopened. We began the planning – the actual memo from the provost was dated April 27, 1993, and between then and '97 when the building opened, we spent a good bit of time sorting through goals and objectives, format —. One of the committee members and I went to a living-learning conference together to try to see what other schools were doing and bring that back to the group. So we really had the luxury of a lot of time to plan this.

Sellers: Were there other schools that were already doing this?

Moser: Not the same model, but yes, there were schools all over the country. Michigan State has had a residential college program. I know when I was a student there in the late '60s, it was already in existence. The University of Michigan had several programs. UNC Greensboro. Virginia hosted the conference we went to. So a lot of campuses had different programs that followed different models.

Sellers: What was different about our model?

Moser: Probably the thing that I think is most impressive even now is that a lot of campuses that have living-learning programs, it's housing pretty much doing it on their own and trying to get faculty buy-in. This came from the top, from the leadership of the university, had distinguished faculty involved from the get-go working hand in hand with Student Affairs staff and students to plan this. And there was money allocated for it. Many of these programs have no funding, and they rely on one dedicated person who does it for a while and gets burned out. Then the program may or may not survive. But with the programs that we have in place here, with the exception of the education program (which was discontinued last year), the programs have sustained themselves. And I think it is because there is funding, faculty gets some kind of compensation for providing leadership to these programs, and there is a mechanism, especially with the Bryan program, to have a rotation and find new people to come in as subsequent directors to keep things going.

Sellers: What's the average life span of a director?

Moser: That's a good question, and I'm not sure what the answer is. I think probably if you ask Dennis Moore or Bob Bradley or Fred Leyseifer, they could tell you that from their perspective.

Sellers: The first group that you had in, in '97, how did it work?

Moser: It worked beautifully.

Sellers: No bugs or —?

Moser: The only thing I remember is a couple students transferred out of FSU. But one

was going to the Naval Academy and the other had another wonderful – I think went to NYU to their film school. So if you were just looking at attrition, you might be concerned about it. But they were going to very positive alternative places. Things went very well. I remember we had a group picture; we got the whole building [comments about persons in the picture not transcribed]; we got not everybody but most of the hall together for an end-of-the-year picture and had a celebration. I do know that some of the students came to George Weaver pleading to be able to stay in Bryan. So our staff in Housing, I think, tried to help some of them to co-locate to another building together so they could keep their friendship groups intact.

Sellers: Has it been more of an academic advantage over the years to the students or an emotional advantage, or can you not separate those?

Moser: I think it's really combined. I think wherever the students live, they develop the friendship groups and the sense of community that make it special. But having the academic component along with that, I think, is just a significant value-added experience for them. And there is some pretty definitive research over the course of time that living-learning programs do make a difference for student success.

Sellers: Has there been any attempt to track the students who have gone through the program to see if they've gone ahead and completed their degrees and gone on to other things?

Moser: Yes. We do it annually. We find that the students who participated in the Bryan program do better academically and are more apt to graduate from Florida State, and do so on a timely basis.

Sellers: That's interesting, because they're coming a little bit hesitant to throw themselves into the big to-do of college on such a large scale.

Moser: Some of them. But they're also the people who want to take advantage of an opportunity like this. So what they bring as entering characteristics may be different from other students, even though they may not have higher GPAs or higher test scores.

Sellers: And they have to do a little bit more to get in.

Moser: Exactly.

Sellers: Make an extra effort, where other students who apply for housing just have to arrive with money. Does Bryan Hall cost any more to be a part of the program?

Moser: No. The renovated buildings have a higher rental rate than the non-renovated community bath style. But there's no extra cost to participate in this or any of the other programs.

Sellers: Has the cost gone up proportionally to the cost for the rest of a college education?

Moser: Proportionate to the other residence halls, yes. I will say that when we entered into the food contract with Aramark, in order to pay for the renovation of the Suwannee Dining Hall the finance administration was required to show a guarantee of 1,500 meal plans. And in order to do that, they wanted Housing to require meal plans. I was willing to do that for a group not to exceed 1,500. And that was the group that had special renovated facilities on the east side of campus around the Suwannee Dining Hall. So it didn't cost more to be in the program; at the point at which the Aramark contract began, they also had a food plan expectation.

Sellers: Has there been a problem with requiring that?

Moser: Not really. Every year we get some questions from people. But people make a decision based on whether they want to participate or not. With the construction of DeGraff and Wildwood, students have new facilities in suite-style arrangements available to them without being a program or requiring a meal plan. So that probably has taken care of any conflict that existed over that.

Sellers: Many years ago there were certain dormitories that were set aside specifically for freshmen and then specifically for upperclassmen. Other than Bryan Hall and the other learning center areas, is that still the case?

Moser: Really, the only non-freshmen buildings are apartments – Ragans, McCollum, Rogers; those are for people above the first year level.

Sellers: So you don't let freshmen in those?

Moser: Right. We just feel like they need to be in a more traditional setting where they're forced to have more interaction with other people and get out of their rooms and do things. The apartments offer more privacy, which we think is more appropriate for people after their first year.

Sellers: What kind of ups and downs have you seen over the 12 years or so of the learning center? Have there been really, really good years and really, really dismal years?

Moser: I can't think of any really negative time. I do know that – I think the faculty were disappointed that the mentor program wasn't as successful as they wanted it to be. It was required initially, and then they had a tough time getting students to sign up for them. George Weaver can probably give you a better perspective on that than I can. So they made it optional, and some students took advantage of it for a while. But at some point it ceased to be an expectation.

Sellers: So we don't have mentoring opportunities any more?

Moser: I don't believe we do any more, but Dennis Moore could answer that for you.

Sellers: What about faculty? Has there been a problem getting faculty to teach the classes?

Moser: That would be a Dennis or George question. Our role – see, we have a coordinator of living-learning programs in Housing who reports to me. That person works to help with the promotion of the program, the applications, making sure that the housing assignments jell with the selection and all of that. But as far as the selection of the faculty and all that, that's left to the faculty directors.

Sellers: Okay. The students don't take all their classes in Bryan Hall. Is there a requirement that they take a certain number?

Moser: The expectation was that they'd take at least one class each semester there. I don't know over time what's happened with that expectation. The other thing I will say over time, as we had other programs available and as other buildings have come on line that are new, the demand for the Bryan program, as some of the other programs, has decreased. Whereas before we had multiple times the applications as we had spaces, it's become more of a challenge to ensure that we have people who truly want to be there and have the commitment and have ample people to choose from for those slots.

Sellers: Have you ever been in a position where you didn't have enough people?

Moser: Not yet.

Sellers: Is it steadily declining?

Mercier: We're actually pulling back up in applications a little this summer – we have 900

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Sellers: Denise Mercier is joining the interview. What's your title, exactly?

Moser: Coordinator of living-learning programs.

Sellers: We were talking about the overwhelming reception originally for Bryan Hall, and then the other living accommodations and programs that have come on line have kind of decreased the desire for student to get into Bryan Hall —

Mercier: Either that, or the new facilities that are available – they have more options.

Sellers: Right, they have more options. We were wondering if it was steadily declining, but you just said you have over 900 applications.

Mercier: I'm sorry; I need to get my bearings. We have 900 overall.

Sellers: For housing?

Mercier: For all the programs.

Sellers: And those programs include WIMSE —

Mercier: Nursing, public service, leadership in public service, social justice, social science and public affairs — there are seven – music —.

Sellers: And are all these the same idea as Bryan? Was Bryan the prototype?

Mercier: Each one of them is a little different. Some of them are major-specific, others are interests —.

Sellers: And Bryan is the general freshman —

Moser: They're all — you know, that phrase “general freshmen,” I think, is misleading. They're all designed for first year students.

Mercier: And they might have a couple of returning sophomores or something. It's general in a sense that their theme is curiosity and a desire to learn. Dennis can speak to this better than I can, but I usually tell families it's all about academic exploration and discovery, and the range of academic opportunities that you can find here. So in terms of discipline, it's the only one that's truly _____[??].

Sellers: So from 1,200 in '97, what do we have specifically for Bryan Hall?

Mercier: If you give me just a moment, I'll run and look.

Sellers: So it looks like George Weaver is going to be a very important person.

Moser: George came in the last year of the planning. We had already determined the program, and then he came in as – I think Jim Smith said the he implemented what the committee had kind of put together. And he was the right person to do that.

Mercier: We have 217. So it is pretty low for Bryan this year. I think that has to do with – you know, compared to the first year, they have six more learning community options. And as [Rita] I'm sure already explained, when Bryan opened it was one of very few of the really beautiful buildings with a suite-style floor plan. Now they have nine of those.

Moser: And the smallest building on campus, too. I mean, that really attracted —

Sellers: And the oldest.

Moser: I don't think the oldest had much to do with it; they were more interested in the newness.

[Comments about the historical significance of Bryan Hall not transcribed]

Sellers: If you have 217 applications and you have 128 possible spaces, do you have students who, after you accept them – do you have a backup contingency plan.

Moser: Um-hum.

Sellers: How often do you need to pull from waiting students?

Mercier: It really varies, and there are a number of factors that change students' plans. I would say in any given summer, I would expect five to fifteen spaces to open up between May when they are accepting invitations and August.

Sellers: For Bryan?

Mercier: Yes, for Bryan. And then one to five additional spaces might open up in December.

Moser: This last year we had, unfortunately, a new factor changing students' plans, and that was the economy.

Sellers: I was going to ask if the economy has an impact on the 217 now because of the extra expense that's involved in the food plan.

Mercier: You know, some students do cite that. I don't know how many, but some students have said that to the directors in deciding —.

Sellers: So if a student leaves at the end of the first semester, you can bring new students in for just the spring semester.

Mercier: And those alternates are usually delighted to get that invitation.

Sellers: Are these usually students who have already been at Florida State?

Mercier: They always are. They are students who applied either in April, or we do accept invitations late over the summer.

Sellers: So they have come anyway, even though they didn't get into the Bryan Hall learning center.

Moser: I really doubt that anybody has made a decision not to attend FSU because they didn't get in that program.

Mercier: That would be my guess, too.

Moser: It would be more likely in music.

Mercier: Yeah, that might be a factor in music.

Sellers: What haven't I probed your mind for from the housing angle that is important? There's a resident counselor in there. Is there an RA?

Moser: The residence coordinator is the full-time person who works with the RAs and the other staff.

Sellers: And you said there were three RAs. Where do you get them?

Moser: They go through the regular RA selection. But before we place them, we give the faculty directors an opportunity to give input if there's somebody in a particular – that came through the program or that they would really love to see in there building, then we ask them about that. And that may or may not be the case that we have — but often times there is at least one person who's come through the program, so they have an appreciation for that. We don't ask the RAs to do any special programming beyond what they do in the other buildings, because the academic piece is probably enough for the students. We don't want to overload them with the academic part. But the community building, all of the things that our staff would normally do to help the students transition here – get to know people get involved – they do those things.

Sellers: Is the resident coordinator in charge of the evening programs? They have ice cream socials and things like that. Or do you all have anything to do with that as far as housing?

Moser: We do, but they have a staff member who – and Bryan is kind of unique, I think, in that regard. They've really taken it upon themselves to do some of those social gatherings.

Mercier: There is an ice cream social for all of them, and Dennis initiates that. But that's for all of the learning communities.

[comments about personal teaching experiences not transcribed]

Sellers: Your part ends when you get the students assigned?

Moser: Well, kind of, but not really. We deal with all the non-academic issues, and sometimes the non-academic issues affect the academic. So we're working back and forth in that regard. For example, if we have to remove a student from the building, that means typically that they're not in the program. So when we have to make a decision like that, we want to be

working together on that. For example, behavior issues.

Sellers: Has that occurred?

Mercier: We've had more things like the student didn't take seriously the academic expectations and maybe isn't going to class or isn't passing a class or something like that. But there have been behavior issues.

Sellers: So are there academic standards that have to be maintained in order to – I mean, do you have to make a certain GPA in the fall semester to stay in the spring?

Mercier: No, but there are activities required that always include a colloquium, and then at least one additional class. I don't pretend to remember from year to year whether Bryan is one of the ones where they must take both the colloquium and the additional class in both fall and spring, but they always have to take it in the fall. There are six courses that students choose from – you know, because you've taught. So those two, and then it varies from year to year what the learning communities will require of their students in the other activities. But those two – students just often think – not often, occasionally think it's different from the _____[??] requirement and they don't really _____[??].

Sellers: Do you think the ability to roll out of bed and come to class in your bedroom slippers has anything to do with that?

Mercier: Some say that it does. What do you think?

Moser: [showing a newspaper clipping with a picture of a student attending class in pajamas]. This was from '99.

Sellers: I've had them come to class in their bunny slippers.

Moser: Well, she's got her jams on. She just put a little jacket over it. So the convenience. And, you know, being in a class of 22 as opposed to 40 or 50. I remember talking with Paul Elliott; he taught early on in there. He was used to hundreds, and having to readjust his whole curriculum down to 22.

Sellers: For one thing, you don't get a grader [laughs].

Moser: From the student's standpoint, it's hard to hide when there are only 22 of you, too.

Sellers: You don't have to take roll – you can look out and just see who's not there.

Moser: Right. So it has its pluses and minuses, depending on how you view it.

Sellers: I think it lends a casualness to the class that, depending on how mature the student is, may be detrimental.

Moser: Well, there's some classroom management issues that you would face in Bryan that you wouldn't face elsewhere. And I've observed that – I used to sit in on the program every now and then, and I was appalled at people looking through clothes catalogs and stuff like that in colloquium. But at least it was 100 and some people. But the familiarity they have with each other can work negatively to the faculty member's situation unless they're really good at classroom management and have the respect of the students. I think you really have to set parameters that you might not have to deal with as much in other classrooms.

I should mention that we were one of four campuses visited by the National Study of Living-Learning programs.

Sellers: And when was that?

Moser: This past year. Based on the students' answers to the survey, they picked four – Clemson, Florida State, Miami of Ohio, and Maryland-Baltimore County. So they sent a team here, spent three or four days observing and interviewing to try to figure out what made these programs deliver what maybe the other campuses weren't achieving.

Mercier: This study is an email survey of students, a combination of objective, multiple choice, and comments, and they do it nationwide. Pretty good participation, and obviously really good results from our students.

Moser: Now, the Bryan Hall wasn't one of the programs they came to target; it was the Women in Math, Science, and Engineering, and the Social Science and Public Affairs. And in that 2007 study, we decided to include our honors community in Landis, too. So they wanted to study that.

Sellers: So Bryan, despite the fact that the application numbers are declining, it's going to pick up again as the economy picks up, or do you see this as "it's run its course?"

Mercier: I don't think it's run its course. I'd like to see a few more applications, but they're actually functioning very well with 217. They're fine; they've got a nice healthy alternate list for both men and women, and all of their spaces are filled. I think it's what Rita said, you have eight more of these beautiful buildings, which is one of the draws for them. And you've got six other learning communities for them to choose from. And for a certain kind of student, there's a real – there's a certain sexiness, a certain excitement about these major-specific, career-specific ones that —

Sellers: A cache.

Mercier: Cache, yes, that's the word I want. In journalism they use the word "sexy." It's

not the right work. I know what you mean, but that's not the right word. Yeah, there's a cache. And you know, what do you know at 17? And the idea of being in Women in Math, Science, and Engineering has a very different cache. I think in a lot of ways, and I hope Dennis would agree, and I think Rita would, while it's kind of nail-biting for Dennis and me to have lower applications (or his assistant), the plus in there is the fact – I would think the reduction or theoretical reduction in the number of students who are applying simply because this is one way to get into a _____[??] building would be —

Moser: Way down.

Mercier: Yeah, really substantial and would really increase his odds of getting really quality participation from all _____[??].

Sellers: Is the 217 this year the lowest you've had?

Mercier: No, it was lower last year. And we're not done. We'll have more applications coming in this summer.

Sellers: So actually it probably goes up and down. Probably will never reach 1,200 again because of the other opportunities, but as long as you stay in the ballpark of 300 or so —.

Mercier: Oh, I think 300 — just looking at how we seem to be doing now, I think 300 would be nice and healthy. You know, you could relax a little more with 500, but on the other hand, that's a whole lot of _____[??].

Moser: A lot of reading.

Mercier: Yeah, I would think Dennis is pleased not to have 500.

End