

**Nevada State
College**



**History
Collection**

Oral History of Erika Beck

An Interview

Conducted by

Brittany Wadas

April 27, 2010

Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project

Produced by:

Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project

Department of History, Nevada State College 89002

Directors: Peter La Chapelle, Ph.D. and Kate Hahn

Project Manager: Melissa S. Stoner

Project Assistants: Noelle Cruz

Any element within, including, without limitation, text, logos, graphics, images, photographs, multimedia features, or other likeness or materials may be republished, reposted, retransmitted, or redistributed without the prior consent of Nevada State College. Nevada State College and Nevada State College Libraries requests acknowledgement whether the use is oral, web or in print. Commercial use of any portion in this material requires permission. For further information please contact Nevada State College Library: <http://nsc.edu/2744.asp>

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible with the support of the Nevada State Library and Archives and the generosity of the Institute of Museum and Library Services through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). The collaboration between the Nevada State College department of Humanities and the Library provided a unique opportunity for undergraduate students and project staff to work together with community members from the City of Henderson to acquire a series of first-person narratives.

The transcript received minimal editing to preserve the conversational style and content of the narrator.

This interview is from the series *Bridging the Past: Henderson through Oral History*.

Erika Beck

Oral History of Erika Beck, Ph.D.

An Interview Conducted by Brittany Wadas on April 27, 2010

Biography

Erika Beck joined Nevada State College in 2002, moving from San Diego and her position as a faculty fellow at UC San Diego. She has a Ph.D in Experimental Psychology from the University of California, San Diego, and used her academic experience to build the psychology program at NSC.

The challenge of building a middle tier college for the state of Nevada was a contributing factor in Dr. Beck's decision to be part of the founding faculty at NSC. She held the positions of Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Faculty Senate Chair, creating the school's policies, core values, curriculum, and the faculty.

She has high hopes in turning NSC into a leader in technology and innovative teaching practices in the 21st century.

¹Dr. Beck is currently Nevada State College's Provost and Executive Vice President

¹ "About the Provost." *Nsc.nevada.edu*. NSC, 2014. Web. 28 Mar. 2014

Erika Beck

Narrator: Erika Beck
Interviewer: Birttany Wadas
Interview Date: April 27, 2010
Location: Nevada State College, Henderson, NV

Brittany Wadas: Okay, alright we're just going to do a little brief interview or intro and then we'll just do some questions. It's going to be as detailed as possible.

Erika Beck: Okay.

Brittany Wadas: Anything that you don't want on the record just let us know and we'll turn it off, okay.

Erika Beck: Oh yeah, yeah.

Brittany Wadas: No big details of scariness right there, okay. Alright, today is April 27th, 2010. We are at the LAS building in Henderson Nevada. This is Brittany Wadas interviewing Erika Beck. Okay, first off we just wanted to thank you because this is part of our big project and not only is it going to help our project but I think it's really going to be beneficial to the school. We're going to start off just give us a little brief intro of just how you got to where you are today and just a little bit before NSC.

Erika Beck: Oh, before coming to Nevada State College.

Brittany Wadas: Yeah.

Erika Beck: Sure. I have a PhD in experimental psychology. And my particular background is in cognitive neuroscience. And I was in San Diego prior to coming to Nevada and I was a faculty fellow at UC San Diego and doing research and teaching and, yeah, doing the academic faculty gig.

Brittany Wadas: Alright, when you first heard about NSC and you got hired on, tell us a bit about what you were hired to do and just kind of how you were feeling about that.

Erika Beck: Yeah, so I was actually specifically recruited to NCS and with the idea that I would be a good person to help build the psychology program. So I was actually hired to sort of build the psychology program and be an academic faculty member. And I didn't totally know what I was signing on for, what it really looked like. But I had a really good relationship right away as soon as I met Richard Moore and Lois Becker, who is our first Provost, and spent a lot of time talking to them and really talked about creating the middle tier of higher education.

So I come from California where we have all three tiers and they're very well-articulated. And it's sort of the public university – premiere public university system in the world. And so the fact that Nevada didn't have that

Erika Beck

was really surprising to me that they didn't have the three tiers, and that they wanted to create that middle tier was really exciting. And that's pretty much what lured me away from beachfront office space and, you know, premiere research university was the idea that we could build something new. And really what Dr. Moore and Dr. Becker really kind of had in mind at that time was building a teaching institution that really attracted faculty members from incredibly prestigious universities who had research one background and experience, but that really loved teaching and wanted to focus on teaching. I was at an institution that is very prestigious, but also was teaching 500 students at a time on a stage with a microphone, which is a very different experience. I had taught students in classrooms of 30 and this is going to be personalized attention and really building a college for the 21st century in the right way, in a new way. And that was really, really exciting.

So I picked up absolutely everything, didn't know one person in the entire state of Nevada, no one. I came with my U-Haul and my two dogs, and that was it, and came to the middle of nowhere. The first time that I went to the college and they asked me to fill out my paperwork, Dr. Moore called me, his assistant called me and said can you come in and fill in your paperwork and they had a trailer. I don't know if you've heard about the trailer yet. Oh, the trailer. So they had a trailer. I had already moved here and it was before - we didn't get on contract until I think it was August 1st. It was either July 1st or August 1st. And the college literally opened its doors like four weeks later, which is not a lot of time to have faculty on board before you open your doors. And so I went down - Dawson wasn't even open yet. They were in the trailer. There was literally, like, five people in the trailer with a fax machine and they're all sort of shouting at each other and it's a mobile unit on Lake Mead Drive across from the gas station. And I pulled up and said this has got to be the wrong place. There's no way that this is actually where I'm going. And I walked in and handed them my paperwork and I walked out and called my department chair at UCSD and said I have made a horrible mistake. I have made a horrible mistake; I do not know what I was thinking. I have no idea because they had said the campus would be developed. And I interviewed with them out here, but I was at the system office where the chancellor is. So that was my first experience by [inaudible]. And they said we told you you shouldn't go to Nevada. What were you thinking leaving San Diego? Who does that? I don't know.

And so then when this campus opened the first time that we walked in it was a vitamin warehouse. I mean, it really was a vitamin warehouse. We had three classrooms on the left hand side. There were 13 employees total. Right before all of that happened, Dr. Moore stepped down as president so that was a little disconcerting. He stepped down as president and then Christine Chairsell stepped in as the interim president. And Dr. Chairsell was the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in the system office in NSHE. So she was actually the president that opened our doors and in the meantime they were having a search process for a new president, Dr. Romesburg who was an outstanding president, really outstanding. And Dr. Chairsell is pretty fabulous too. So yeah, we had no furniture in any of the offices so I literally brought

Erika Beck

my laptop in, there were three full time tenure track academic faculty members total. And I brought my laptop in and we sat on the floor of my office in Dawson because there were no desks. And we used my laptop for a few days to try and build things. We didn't have anyone who was a receptionist so we sat at the front desk answering the phones. The president, Dr. Chairsell, came in and said we don't have anybody to answer the phones. People need to answer the phones so you guys are going to answer the phones. I'm, like, where am I? Where am I? Actually it turned out to be a really great experience and that's sort of what started it all. Literally, we did everything. Everybody did everything. There was no real ego about it, very different than what you're used to in larger academic campuses. And the students came in and we had 177 students and we were going, like, mad trying to evaluate transcripts which normally academic faculty members do not do. It usually happens in a registrar's office, which is how it happens now, but we're evaluating transcripts and getting students in and getting classes and assigning them.

And it's so funny because we didn't have anything and it is still probably the happiest year I've ever had in a professional life. It was so fun. It was so great. It was really, really great. And I still look back on it and think I've missed that energy because everybody knew - what are we doing? We're in the middle of nowhere in a refurbished vitamin warehouse teaching these students with 13 people and 177 students and there were a lot of really very difficult op-eds and all the newspapers talking about how we were wasting tax payer dollars. They called us the academic outhouse which we then embraced and our provost had a big picture of an outhouse in her office. And it was ironic because her PhD's from Stanford and she really embraced the academic outhouse concept. But man, we worked like seven days a week, 12, 14 hours a day, and it was so great. It was really great. The students just - I've never seen anything like it and I still see it. I've never seen students so dedicated to an institution and that they were so grateful for the amount of attention that they were getting from their faculty, which you don't really see. That's the whole reason why I wanted to be here and wanted to be a part of establishing this is because I thought that's really the way to do it is you get faculty members who could be at Wilson, or who could be at Williams, but really want to teach and really want to interact with the students and really want to give them the benefit of that individualized attention. And particularly for a student body who wouldn't necessarily succeed in a 500 person lecture hall, it takes a certain kind of student to be able to do well in a 500 student lecture hall. But what you realize when you teach that is that they don't really need you. They could learn everything even if you didn't show up and you just pressed play on the tape recorder. I mean, they don't need you at all. They're the sort of student who will always do well.

So it was really great being here, and I think all the faculty felt that way because we knew the students, like, really benefitted from us being here in a way that they had no options before we existed. So that was a pretty great year and I had the benefit all the way through. I taught every psychology course. I taught them all. So by the time that the students graduated I had

Erika Beck

taught all of their courses which was really awesome because by the time they finished they - I had really been able to take them through - I was able to do things with them that you could never normally do with students because you don't have that kind of consistency. And there was the big joke, Erika, what will you teach this semester? Will you teach us personality? Will you teach us - and they'd just like submit their - this is what we'd really like for you to teach. Alright, okay, I can teach that one. Oh, will you teach abnormal at this time? Or, we want this or we want that and it was really, really great. But then, of course, we started to grow. And in 2004 our Provost promoted me to Director of Liberal Arts and Sciences. And so I took over arts and sciences at that point and she was promoted to - I guess at that point she was promoted to provost. Before then - actually I think her original title was Dean of Arts and Sciences. And then she was promoted to provost. And then her real work began and we just started hiring lots and lots of faculty members and lots of faculty members who had very similar ideas. It's amazing how many faculty members there are that are out there who have a similar idea about, gee, I wish I could just build something the right way based on what's happening now as opposed to what did happen a 100 years ago because most institutions are a 100 years old. The institution I came from was actually only about 60-years-old. And in just 60 years you can become very entrenched and things sort of happen. They happen the way that they happen.

And so there are a lot of faculty members and you've probably had classes with a lot of them who have come from these really prestigious institutions who have these really incredible research backgrounds, who really just wanted to find an institution where they could do those things but where they really could spend time with students and they could really build things in a new way using all kinds of cutting edge technology, using - and just doing things very - we are very different than a lot of other institutions. And I actually love that. That's why I'm still here because I had no reason to come here to begin with except for the students. I had no reason to come here at all. And I'm so glad that I did because this really is - it's fundamentally different than any institution that I've ever been at. But I still do miss those days where it was just this small group of people drinking a lot of Red Bull. We drank a lot of Red Bull. But we worked like seven days a week. It was really great.

Brittany Wadas: Wow! Talk...[audio cut out]

[Begin audio]

Brittany Wadas: Talk a little bit about how you went from teaching psychology to becoming the dean.

Erika Beck: So I actually was the founding Faculty Senate Chair for the institution. This is actually Dr. Moore's fault. So when - all of his fault - when I came we established a faculty senate. So a faculty senate is a governing body. It's like NSSA for you guys. So it's a governing body that represents faculty interests, matters of faculty welfare and concern, and that they have an official role in

Erika Beck

the Board of Regents meetings and also in internal campus politics and internal campus governance. So the President ultimately makes decisions about institutions, but they do that based on input for administrators, but also from faculty and from students. And the formal body that delivers that feedback on behalf of faculty is the faculty senate. And so we didn't have a faculty senate. We were brand new. We didn't have anything. And so Dr. Moore convinced everyone that - including me - that I needed to be their founding Faculty Senate Chair and had absolutely no idea how to go about doing that. And that was literally day one. And they all decided, yep, you would be a great Faculty Senate Chair and had no idea what I was doing. So I spent a lot of time with the other institutions and a lot of time at the Board of Regents meetings and a lot of time with our administration sort of building our policies and figuring out what are we as an institution, what does our policy look like, what do our procedures look like, what do we value, what are our values, and then also building curriculum because we didn't have a lot of curriculum.

So the first thing I did was build the psychology program and then added the Bachelor of Science in psychology, and then the Provost started asking me to help her build lots of other curriculum and hire all of the part time instructors. And so slowly, but surely I sort of got sucked into all of those sort of projects and processes and spent a lot of time working with our former president, initially with Dr. Chairsell who was the interim, but then with Dr. Romesburg. And really I did not choose administration. And if you would have asked me before I came I would have told you I would never become an administrator because if you talk to any faculty members they'll tell you that that's the dark side and that's where you go if you sell your soul. You go over to administration. And I really wanted no part of it. But then after two years of doing that the President and the Provost said we think you would make a really great administrator. And I said you're crazy. I'm not an administrator. And I had spent two years fighting with them about faculty rights and what the faculty need and usually those two objectives are at odds, and sometimes they are, and sometimes they still are, but they said but you're so good at this. This is just what you should do. You're crazy. I don't want to do that. I want to teach. I want to be with the students. That's what I love. That's why I came here.

And then slowly they convinced me that it would be different. That our relationship between faculty members and students - that it is different and that it would continue to be different. I wouldn't be the same as going to the dark side where you have a lot of discontent that it really was a shared governance model that would work and that honestly my background in psychology helps a lot because a lot of what you have to do is deal with people, and a lot of what you have to do is deal with unhappy people. And the idea that I could really have a lot of impact on who we hired as faculty. That's really, ultimately, what sort of convinced me because it was really going to be who are all of those faculty members who come? That's what's going to shape what happens 10 years and 20 years from now. So I reluctantly agreed. And it turns out that it actually has been a really great

Erika Beck

experience but it's not as fun as teaching. It's not as fun as teaching, not even close, but it's good and you impact more people, a lot more people. And really the way that you impact the students the most is by hiring the faculty. Most of these faculty members who've been hired all came after that. So that's - and I'm so - I'm extremely proud of our faculty members. I really think they are - they could toe to toe with any faculty anywhere and we're happier, way happier. Faculty love it here. They're really positive. They're really engaged. We have a really good relationship and it's a really good place to work.

Brittany Wadas: Alright, so tell me...[audio cut out]

[Begin audio]

Brittany Wadas: ...been here. Talk about, like, one of your major challenges that you've had to encounter and maybe like one of your greatest achievements that you've accomplished.

Erika Beck: Well, I would say that one of the greatest challenges has really been public image of our institution really. And so they started with - there was a lot of politics surrounding establishing our institution which isn't unlike other institutions that have been established. So, you know, you see that fairly often. You see it in the Cal State system as well. As soon as you have a new institution that comes in it becomes competition for students, right, competition for a budget. So it isn't unlike that, but I was really stunned by how negative the perception was in terms of NSHE and not even just NSHE, but the general public about Nevada State College, and not just about Nevada State College, but quite honestly about higher education and about this notion that somehow there's no public good in higher education. There isn't a benefit to the public in higher education such that it should be funded by tax dollars. That really who benefits are individual students and they should be funding it themselves. That was very different sort of philosophy than the philosophy in California where you would have never have heard people say that sort of thing. You hear a little more of that now just because of the economy and that sort of thing but generally it's not the sort of thing you have to combat.

So really I would say my biggest challenge, and it happened as Faculty Senate Chair and then obviously as Dean, has been being a face for the institution in a way that really changes people's perceptions about who we are and what we do so that we are this incredibly competent faculty and really dynamic institution and we're doing things in such a different way than how anyone else is doing them and really sort of branding our institution and changing that momentum. That was very difficult and that really is just all about personal relationships. It's all about spending time with lots of different people, politicians, and the community at large, and giving presentations and sort of always being one of the things you learn is you have to be better than everybody else. You have to be on your A game everywhere you go because if you're not - I mean, we can't afford to be on our B game whereas UNLV

Erika Beck

can sort of rest on their laurels in the community and so can UNR. Nevada State cannot do that. So we really always have to be a step ahead of everyone else and that includes our faculty who honestly, I don't know, and I've never worked with people who work harder or in the same, just harder. It's just smarter. They're so bright and they're so dedicated to getting things done, things that students would never see outside of a classroom that have to do with the institution as a whole.

So that was definitely the biggest challenge and I would say that's probably honestly the biggest accomplishment. Probably the biggest accomplishment was attracting the caliber of faculty that we have. I mean in some ways I sort of can't believe it especially before this building was built and we're recruiting out of Dawson, they were able to convince me. It really took the you have to have vision and you have to be willing to not have an ego and you have to be willing to say I'm really going to get in it. It's a lot more work than it is at other institutions. Being here in terms of service and committee work that faculty members sit on, it is so much more work than any other institution, writing curriculum and building policy and all that. That is so much more work. And in addition to that, the amount of work that we really expect from faculty in terms of dedication to the students, in terms of, you know, being flexible and really working with students who have a difficult time and spending lots of time with them that's much more - our faculty members give much, much more than faculty members do at other institutions and that's part of being better. It's part of being the - it's something unique, it's something special, it's something to be cherished. And so if we want it to continue then we have to all really embrace that. So I'm really, really proud of the faculty members we've been able to recruit. I can't imagine ever being at another institution. I'm sure if I ever go to another institution this will never happen again. And I'll never work with people that are so positive and amiable and really love the students and really committed and bright. It just doesn't really happen. Most faculty are disgruntled. You maybe don't want to put that in, but it's true. They are. At least 50 percent of them are disgruntled.

Brittany Wadas: Alright, well...[audio cut out]

[Begin audio]

Brittany Wadas: ...everything that's been going on with the budget cuts where do you see Nevada State College going?

Erika Beck: I see us doing exactly what we've done before which is keeping that A game. So I think in terms of budget cuts it requires the kind of innovation that we already have going on. And I see, at least I hope, my hope is that the budget cut scenario, and not just in Nevada but nationwide, but also in Nevada will force institutions and systems to become better at what they do and that that better will be measured because ultimately if the metrics turn to the quality of the education, and not just the quality of the education, but also the quality of the education relative to the student body. You know, we serve primarily first

Erika Beck

generation students, really low income students. Our median income for students who receive financial aid is 17 thousand dollars a year. It's a very low income student body. Underrepresented students - if you look at every institution and sort of the kind of population that they're serving, budget cuts should force all institutions to measure that and have really hard numbers. It shouldn't just be how big is an institution. And I'm - I wouldn't be particularly thrilled to see Nevada State College at 20 thousand students if we don't have really high quality outcomes from our student body. And if we're not assessing what our programs deliver, which we do really, really well, and then documenting that.

So what I am hoping is that you're going to see more reliance on metrics. And if that happens Nevada State College will always win because we are on our A game and because the faculty are all really involved in these sorts of things and that sort of data, so graduation rates and retention rates. And I think that the college needs to stay really committed to serving that population that wasn't served before we were here. There are - we have lots of different kinds of students. We have students who could have gone to UNLV and been very successful. We have lots of students who would never have been able to succeed at UNLV or wouldn't have been able to get in and had only the option of a two year degree. And that's just not acceptable. It's completely unacceptable that the students who have a desire and an interest and are willing to put in the effort to get a four year degree would find themselves unable to obtain a four year degree. I can't even imagine that sort of a scenario but that's exactly what existed before we were here. So I mean it's really - it's a social justice issue honestly. It's access to an education, a public education that's affordable to the students who need it. And Nevada really needs to have higher college graduation rates and college entrance rates, and high school graduation rates for that matter if it wants to sort of turnaround.

So I think that the college will start to become more branded at serving those populations and our reputation as we get more students out in the community. We hear a lot from community members about the quality of our students because there is a difference in sort of what we provide anything that will build on itself. And I think that the college will expand. You'll see a little less of the Nevada State College, what is that? I've never heard of that. Or, it's just a nursing school. You hear that a lot as well. It is sort of what happened and how we started and much more of the "it's the middle tier." It's the middle tier of a three tier system and I hope that there will be at some point another version of Nevada State College in Reno, because that's really how you build a premiere higher education system. I don't know that that'll happen any time soon because of budget cuts, but I think that we'll get bigger but we'll also get even better and smarter with what we do, doing more with less, which we've been pretty good at. And we'll make it through on the other side and, you know, continue to be really innovative, having lots of technology. I think we'll become very well known for technology in the classroom. No one has access to the kinds of technology that we do because we were just built. And no one has faculty who use technology like we do. I mean, it's pretty amazing actually especially in our science programs. I mean

Erika Beck

we are far more sophisticated than UNLV in terms of science. But they're built a long time ago and they don't have access to brand new facilities and equipment. So I think that that will probably - we'll be much better known for that. And you'll hear less of the "who are they" or "why are they here," why do we need a state college. It's really - you know it's a public education which is unnecessary in some states, but that's because they have that. And in Nevada they've never had it so they don't necessarily understand the role.

Brittany Wadas: Alright, we're going to do a little...[audio cut out]

[Begin audio]

Brittany Wadas: ...final wrap up. Just make any statement or if you want to add anything more for this project because our project is the history of Nevada State College from the beginning. Is there anything from the beginning that you remember that you want future students to know?

Erika Beck: Yeah, I mean the founding class really was very, very committed to the institution and they're really a special group of students who took a big, big risk. And I think that that's still the case when you hear a lot of negative press about the college public relations, that there will be a place for them. I mean the things that happen now including this project and lots of things that happen with student government and the clubs, and all those things really changed the lives of students 10 and 20 years from now when you have a huge institution that it's easy to forget how that all started. It all has an impact. It's always a downstream affect. So it's really those students who are so committed and were out there talking to people and saying how great the institution was. And when people were saying why would you go to that? I mean it was a pretty big risk, refurbished vitamin warehouse. It was a pretty big risk and they didn't know anything about us.

And then they're the ones who really started talking to friends and siblings and really got that word out and that energy and enthusiasm I've never seen anything like it, and I still see it. Our NSSA today it's almost like they would do anything for our student body and for our institution. And I've never really seen students work that hard for an institution. It's different than working hard in your class which is a tremendous amount of work to begin with and just so committed to future students having a place, and the myNSCstory (blog) was tremendous effort on behalf of the students and the budget cut scenario. And the first graduating class was really - there wasn't a dry eye in the house because it was such a challenge to get there. It was really, including me, it was really an experience and it was only two years after that because students came from the community colleges as well. And I would say that it's really something to be proud of. And I would also say that I've taught at lots of other institutions with students who would have done well with a tape recorder who didn't really need my expertise or energy or any of those things. They didn't really need that. I'm so proud of how far students come and in the very beginning, so for me watching all of the different students come through and seeing how far our students have come but also individual students. I

Erika Beck

think it is so much more impressive for students who haven't had opportunities readily available who are willing to fight for those opportunities, whether it be financially or balancing home life or convincing first generation family that college is worthwhile or just turning down jobs that would be much more lucrative at the moment to come to school.

I think it's incredibly impressive. It's more impressive than anything I ever saw at my tier one research institution, that dedication, and that's really all built upon the students and we wouldn't be here if - back then if they wouldn't have been so committed to it because there are a lot of reasons to not go. And there are a lot of reasons to not stay. And even still there are a lot of reasons to not stay as students because it seems really risky and yet they stay and they rave about the quality of our faculty and our institution, and they have just as much vision as the faculty have. And for students it's different because they won't see the campus built out and they won't see - I mean they may if they stay in Nevada, but they won't benefit from that. They're really laying the groundwork for our students who will come later. And I think that's really something special. You very rarely have an opportunity in your life to do something like that. So yeah, I'm pretty - it's an uphill battle and I'm so proud of it. And I think that's something to be really proud of.

Brittany Wadas: Do you have any questions?

Interviewer: No, no.

Brittany Wadas: Alright, well then that's our interview. Thank you so much.

Erika Beck: Thanks, thanks....

[End audio]