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The First Fifty Years: A University Looks Back

By Keren Moros, Kevin Lichty

This work was written by NSU M.A. in Writing graduate students Keren Moros and Kevin Lichty, and based on interviews with notable alumni and former staff who experienced NSU's changing campus at different points in its 50-year history. It was originally published in NSU's student-run newspaper The Current as a multi-part series which we've combined here into one text. Thanks to The Current and to the NSU Office of Student Media for allowing us to re-publish it here.

The beginnings of NSU

“We wanted to be the MIT of the south,” Abe Fischler told me in his office.

Surrounded by family photographs and stacks of papers on his desk, he is like a grandfather with a plaid shirt unbuttoned at the collar, a quick smile and a kind of mischievous wit behind his eyes, the kind of eyes that say to you “If you only knew what I know.”

An assistant kept coming in to try to figure out how to get his email account set up on his new iPad and teach him how to use it, only strengthening this image of the kindly grandfather. Sitting in his office, I felt I should have had a tall glass of iced tea in front of me and be munching on a homemade peanut butter cookie, or sucking on a piece of hard candy.

“If I had known I was going to be filmed, I would have dressed nicer,” Fischler said, playing with his shirt.

I came to Fischler because he had been with Nova University almost since its beginning, because he has seen the university grow from 17 students to more than 26,000, because he knew the men who helped found it, who gave their land and lent their time, knowledge and expertise to help an experiment in education succeed.

Who were these men and what were they like? How did Nova University come to rise out of the drained swamps of the Everglades and become the ninth largest not-for-profit university in the country? My conversation with former NSU president Abe Fischler became a quest.

And out of that quest, I discovered that NSU began with oatmeal—steaming bowls of it shared among local businessmen at Cope’s Restaurant in downtown Fort Lauderdale.

It also began with an old concrete airfield, erected during World War II on Forman Field to help train pilots to land on aircraft carriers. Apathy from state legislatures who had been pumping higher education dollars into north and central Florida and ignored South Florida also created a hole that needed to be filled, especially in graduate and post-graduate science and technology education. Their idea was to create a kindergarten through doctorate education hub in the heart of South Florida, which would become known as the South Florida Education Center.

These men, who called themselves the Oatmeal Club, included Charles Forman, whose family farm would eventually anchor NSU’s main campus, Myron Ashmore, superintendent of Broward County Schools, and Joe Rushing, founding president of the Junior College of Broward College.

For the Oatmeal Club, it was a simple equation: the South Florida Education Center anchored by a world-class research university would mean expanded education, and expanded education equaled growth, development and greater economic opportunity. But it was also about fostering a climate of lifelong education, teaching students how to learn not just how to retain facts and fostering student development from kindergarten through the graduate level.

The Oatmeal Club incorporated into the not-for-profit South Florida Education Center, Inc. in 1961 with Joe Rushing as president and began putting together the pieces of what would become a hub of education that would include Nova Elementary, Nova High School, Broward College and NSU.

But it wouldn’t be easy. They would meet many challenges: fiscal, skepticism from the local community and apathy from state legislators. Nova University itself would barely make it out of the 1960s intact. Davie was a much different place in the 60s. In 1966, the same year construction of the Rosenthal Student Center began, Davie had 800 residents and 4,000 horses. According to a *New York Times* article written in 1966, children could be seen barefoot, riding bareback down the main street of Davie, or fishing on the banks of the New South River Canal, or on particularly warm days

joining their horses and dogs in the canal for a relaxing swim. Davie was horse and cattle country, with dozens of Western corral-style horse-breeding farms.

The main attraction was citrus, and tourists would come to buy it “by the ton,” or packaged in fancy baskets and shipped off with pecans, glazed orange peel and guava jelly stuffed in the empty corners. There was a general store, the Davie Feed and Ranch Supply, Inc., which became an attraction, not because of some re-creation of Hollywood’s idea of the Old West, but because it offered a glimpse into the past at one of the last remaining farm-supply stores in the country, stocked and run the way they were in the early 1900s.

Tourists would come for the riding, offered by dozens of stables in Davie, where trails would wind through exotic and wild tropical growth. Riders could stop to pick wild strawberries or reach up from their saddles and pull oranges right off the trees.

This resemblance of Davie to the Old West days of American expansion is not a coincidence. Inland South Florida was one of the last American frontiers, part of the vast expanse of the Everglades. It was founded by homesteaders from the north and workers returning from the Panama Canal Zone in 1909. It was only accessible by water—an old Mississippi river boat, ill-suited for ocean travel, which departed from St. Augustine and chugged down the Gold Coast and up the New River until it sank one day loaded with cement and other supplies and couldn’t be retrieved.

These were pioneer folk, who worked hard to carve out a deliberately rural life 17 miles from the bustle of downtown Fort Lauderdale, which had been growing exponentially throughout the 40s, 50s and 60s. These men and women loved their seclusion from the city and small-town feel. They cared for their horses as if they were a member of the family. And they only grudgingly began yielding to development in 1961 when the demand to expand westward from the beach could no longer be ignored.

What Davie looked like in 1961, as the Oatmeal Club began development of Nova Elementary and High School, could be described as caught between two worlds. As “Davie In Perspective” put it “a short drive through [Davie], the observer could see a farmer landing an airplane in his backyard, an electronics plant in the midst of an orange grove, and horses grazing on the front lawns.”

To this day, this connection to horses and the outdoors remains. Ray Ferrero, the fifth president of NSU and president of the Florida Bar Association in 1984, doesn’t think the city and its residents have changed much in that respect.

“At its core, the families who are from Davie, who have lived here all their lives, still have a connection to the outdoors,” said Ferrero.

Residents were unsure of how to view the development of the SFEC. On one hand, property values surrounding the Forman Field site were doubling, but long-time resident Carl Wolf was afraid all the development would eventually destroy Davie’s rural character.

Councilman Howard Pearson in 1968 echoed the sentiment: “The people who came to Davie did so because they liked to have some elbow room. They don’t want to be squeezed out of here like in other areas where asphalt jungles have come into being.”

However, businesses welcomed Nova University.

Paul Koenig, who ran the oldest law firm in Davie said, “The merchants welcome Nova because of the influx of people who spend money here.”

Nova University began in this climate where Davie was in the midst of an identity crisis, trying to balance the push to develop with maintaining the rural horse culture of its roots. And on July 1, 1964, Warren J. Winstead, then the director of the U.S. Army’s education program for servicemen and their dependents in Europe, became its first president.

The first steps of NSU

It seemed fitting that I was meeting Clarice Yentsch, one of the five members of NSU’s first graduating class, on Las Olas Boulevard just a few blocks from the site of the university’s first administrative building. It seemed even more fitting that the entrance to her apartment complex lay in the middle of a dimly lit tunnel.

I felt like a detective in a vaguely dystopian science fiction story being ushered into a back room where an elderly shaman who had lived in the “freer” past would impart secret knowledge and wisdom to me. And when the doors opened to the elevator onto the third-floor terrace of Yentsch’s apartment building, where the morning light and soft breeze warmed my face, where a garden lay with benches and staircases spiraled upward like spires into the sky, I knew that’s exactly where I was.

I was here because I wanted to know who the first NSU students were, what they were like and what made them enter in an experiment in starting a research university from scratch.

Yentsch is an energetic and enthusiastic mind. When we were sitting down for our interview, she told me people tell her she talks too fast sometimes.

“If you need me to slow down, just let me know,” she said.

But her mind is the opposite of slow, so I let it free. I sat in a chair in her living room and let her tell me a story.

I began asking why she decided to go to NSU, then called Nova University. And I discovered it was all because of Abraham S. Fischler.

Fischler was in the midst of attempting to revolutionize science education in the country with a focus on process-based inquiry. He wanted to teach elementary, middle and high school students how to form research questions and models for assessing the data they collected. He saw an importance in science education that extended far beyond the traditional boundaries of training scientists.

In a 1961 article for the *Schools Science and Mathematics* journal, Fischler wrote, “The impact which science has on our culture...will depend in part on the desire of our citizenry to support scientific investigation.”

For Fischler, it was important for all students to not just understand the basic facts that science has given us over the years but to also understand the process of scientific inquiry. And to complete this vision, he had to teach the teachers these skills, most of whom had no formal scientific education, and in turn, he became the teachers of those teachers.

Fischler came with an impressive resume. An Ed.D. graduate of Columbia University, Fischler taught at both Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley before being lured by the board of trustees to come to Nova.

“One does not so easily leave Berkeley,” Fischler said. “But I thought about it and realized that teaching at Berkeley was like golfing with a five handicap.”

So Fischler left to start a program from scratch at Nova.

Fischler was a magnet for students who wanted a chance to study side-by-side with someone challenging the science education status quo, including Yentsch, who left her job as a middle school science teacher in part because she would be working very closely with him.

“The teacher-student ratio was pretty much one-to-one back then,” Yentsch said. “You won’t ever have that anywhere else ever again.”

Fischler personally recruited several students to come to Nova. It was important that they came from a diverse background.

“I purposefully went out and recruited a diverse student population, because I didn’t want the hassle of trying to integrate later,” Fischler said.

In our first phone conversation, Yentsch also stressed this point.

“There were 17 of us at the beginning,” she said. “Two women and one black. That’s where we started. And we have become the most diverse student population in the country. It started from the very beginning.”

The black student was Leroy Bolden, a former All-American running back from Michigan State University who was drafted by the Cleveland Browns in the sixth round in 1955 but joined the Air Force instead. He would later play for the Browns in 1958, mostly as a kick returner, where he once returned a kick 102 yards for a touchdown. He was moved to Dallas in the expansion draft and released before the 1960 season. He would later go on to work for the Encyclopedia Britannica and Hewlett-Packard and become assistant director of admissions at the Stanford University graduate business school.

Of the other 17 students, one was from Venezuela and another from India. Marilyn Mailman-Segal would join the student body one year later and become one of the first five graduates alongside Yentsch.

While desegregation efforts began in Florida’s public schools in 1959, by 1970, its public universities were still largely segregated. According to a letter from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, of the seven public universities in the state, one, Florida A&M, was “almost 100 percent Negro while the other six public university had student bodies nearly 100 percent white.”

As in many areas, Nova University was ahead of its time when it came to diversity and integration.

The school officially opened its doors to students in the fall of 1967, to much excitement and fanfare, even though the campus looked less like a college campus and more like the abandoned airfield it sat on. There was one building on campus, the Hollywood-Mailman building, and one in construction, the Parker Building, with a lot of weeds and sand between the two.

Ed Simco, who joined the second class in 1968, describes his wife's first reaction of the campus in Julian Pleasants' book *The Making of Nova Southeastern University: A Tradition of Innovation, 1964-2014*: "'This is Nova University?' His wife asked. 'Where?'"

This didn't stop the celebration. With the enrollment of the first 17 students, the South Florida Education Center (SFEC) board had successfully started a graduate school out of nothing and this in and of itself was an accomplishment.

Winstead proclaimed, "We are doing what MIT and Caltech would do if they could start over."

To succeed at Nova University, students had to be self-motivated. The university was not organized into traditional colleges, there were no traditional classes, lectures were not required, and the university did not go out of its way to help students with deficiencies in their undergraduate education. If a student needed an advanced calculus class to complete a prerequisite for entry into a program, that student would have to find another college to take the class.

"If you didn't know where you were going already as a student, you would not succeed," said Yentsch.

Paul Viebrock, another one of the original students quoted in Pleasants' book said, "You need to be more self-organized here than in other graduate schools. You work at your own pace, but you're expected to achieve faster."

The initial excitement of embarking on a new education experiment would soon wear off as the university would be near bankruptcy within two years. Students paid no tuition. Professors were required to pay their own salaries through research grants. Nova relied on philanthropy from the community to pay its infrastructure and support staff needs.

But cracks began to form. Money was running out. The physical sciences department was already eliminated due to lack of funding. The Parker building, which was to house the physical science laboratories, didn't have the funds necessary to complete the structure so only the outer shell and first floor was built. Warren Winstead, the first president, failed to submit critical accreditation forms to the Southeastern Association of Colleges and Schools, and, in a phone call to Fischler in 1969, the agency demanded a status report be submitted each year until the school achieved accreditation.

Despite word spreading that Winstead dropped the ball on accreditation and that the university might not make payroll, students forged ahead with their research.

“I was just hoping the school would stay open long enough for me to get my degree,” Yentsch said.

The school was bleeding money and at risk of closing altogether. According to Pleasants, businesses began demanding cash-on-demand for services, the electric company threatened to turn off power, vendors who had not been paid were demanding payment, and the federal government had served final notice for payment of payroll tax withholdings.

On Nov. 3, 1969, Winstead resigned, leaving a stack of unpaid bills in his desk. He failed to secure accreditation for the university, failed to bring the school out of its infancy, failed to put it on solid footing for the future. But he did one thing critically important of the long-term success of the university: he convinced Fischler to come.

Fischler’s presidency began with a mountain of debt. His first job was to secure a partnership to inject much needed liquidity.

Before Winstead’s departure, the board of directors reached out to many different partners—Michigan Institute of Technology, California Institute of Technology, University of Miami, Florida State University—but they were either not interested or negotiations fell through.

The financial situation got worse. Payroll checks came with notes asking recipients to wait a few days before cashing them. James Farquhar, then a member of the Board of Trustees, kept the university afloat by any means necessary, including selling 80 acres of the 100 he had just donated to the university.

Of all the accomplishments in Fischler’s long tenure as president of the university, he seemed to me the most proud of never missing a payroll.

“They might have had to wait a few days before cashing their checks, but my staff always got paid,” he said.

Two things happened that allowed Nova’s doors to remain open: New York Institute of Technology agreed to a federation with Nova University in 1970 and Leo Goodwin Sr. died in 1971.

NYIT agreed to pay Nova University \$60,000 a month for 12 months in addition to a lump sum payment of \$750,000 to get Nova out of debt by June 30, 1971, as well as a

final lump sum payment of \$224,000 by Dec. 13, 1973. In return, Nova would help develop its doctoral programs on NYIT's campus and NYIT's president would become chancellor of Nova. The long sought-after partnership with another institution had finally been struck.

Leo Goodwin, Sr., founder of GEICO insurance, bequeathed more than 87 percent of his estate to Nova University in his will, which amounted to \$14.5 million. The gift made Nova one of the richest private universities in the country at the time, according to the New York Times. But getting the funds would not be so easy. Fischler was forced to take the trust to court in 1973 over the gift, and the school wouldn't see any of the funds until 1979.

During the protracted legal battle, the university again fell into debt while in a debate over whether to start a law school and the cycle began all over again.

Growing in the 70s and 80s

NSU has grown tremendously but that growth was not without struggle. One of these was breaking away from New York Institute of Technology, its academic and business partner.

Surmounting money problems

In his book, *The Making of Nova Southeastern University: A Tradition of Innovation, 1964-2014*, Julian Pleasants notes that the 1970s and 1980s brought tough financial times for Nova University. Bills went unpaid, and Abraham Fischler, NSU's fifth president, had to take money from the law school and Educational Leadership Program to make ends meet. By 1975, the university was \$910,000 in debt and the deficit increased to \$3 million from 1983 to 1984.

To make ends meet, Nova borrowed money from New York Institute of Technology, paying them off and then collecting more debt in a cycle. By the late 70s, it became clear to the board of directors that it was time to leave NYIT.

Fischler wanted to stay with NYIT, telling the board that the school was "a great asset to Nova University."

However, he eventually realized that the differences between NYIT and Nova outweighed what he had once called "a truly symbiotic relationship." Finally, after lawsuits and disagreements, NYIT and Nova signed an agreement on Oct. 31, 1985. Nova agreed to pay its debts to NYIT and NYIT and Nova staff left the others' board of trustees.

Building a law school

When the law school started its second year in 1975, the school had 330 students and provisional accreditation from the American Bar Association. But it needed a building.

“I needed a building to get the law school fully accredited,” he said.

Originally, Leo Goodwin, Sr. Hall was owned by Nova’s operating engineers. Fischler expressed his concern for obtaining a building in the article in the Sunday paper. The next day, he got his wish when a Canadian representative from Olympia and York, a real estate development company, offered to pay for a building.

“I didn’t even know who they were,” Fischler said. “He said, ‘I’d like to help you with a building.’ That was like Santa Claus—better than Santa Claus.”

Olympia and York bought the building and refurbished it for \$750,000. It opened in August 1979. Eventually, Nova was able to purchase the building after making payments for 23 years.

“It served a very important spot because I can put in programs in [the East Campus] and then go elsewhere on the main campus,” Fischler said. “And that’s the last building I built.”

Ray Ferrero, then a member of the board and now NSU’s chancellor, knew Shepard Broad for a long time and asked him to donate to the building. Broad donated \$3 million and with a \$5 million gift from Leo Goodwin’s Goodwin Unitrust, the law school was set for full accreditation a future on the main campus.

Being a student

Nova University’s undergraduate population was small but also rich.

Suzanne Ferriss, professor in the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences, first came to NSU as an undergraduate in 1981. She majored in general studies, with a focus on literature.

“We had team-taught classes that were six-credits long when I first came here, and most of the academic curriculum was focused on the general education classes and only later on did you get into your major.”

At that time, there were only 60 undergraduate students and three buildings: the Parker Building, the Mailman-Hollywood Building, and the Rosenthal Student Center. On the Parker Building's first floor was the library and the University School. Then called the Farquhar Center for Undergraduate Studies, the undergraduate college occupied the second floor and the classrooms and faculty offices were there. The third floor included registrar and administrative offices. There were no restaurants at Nova so students would go to places in downtown Davie.

“The [Parker] Building was very different because you went in to come into your college classes through the high school and up to the college, so that was very unusual,” Ferriss said.

Even though there were few students, student life still existed. Ferriss was involved in student government and a poetry club. Her orientation was a beach party, and in one humanities class, she and her classmates went to the theater and movies together.

“Because we were a smaller cohort of students, we had opportunities to do things together ... It was too early for traditions yet,” Ferriss said. “We were new. We were trying new things. The school was really focused on the future and innovation and less on looking back and establishing a tradition.”

Ferriss' professors helped her change her mind about what she wanted to do with her life and she found her career; according to Ferriss, students still get this treatment today.

“The thing that hasn't changed between when I was here and now is those small classes and that interaction with full-time faculty. That's something that we have always had,” she said. “I would say that that's an academic tradition that we've had and that I hope the university never loses.”

Growth and development: NSU's past 25 years

For today's NSU students, it's hard to picture a smaller NSU—an NSU without as many events, without the Don Taft University Center and without the Health Professions Division. What's even harder to believe is that these changes are not much older than the average undergraduate student.

Merging and expanding

The “Southeastern” in NSU's name isn't just there because the university is located in the southeastern part of the U.S.

In his book, *The Making of Nova Southeastern University: A Tradition of Innovation, 1964-2014*, Julian Pleasants discusses how Morton Terry, a graduate of the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, moved to Miami and opened an internal medicine practice. He wanted to open an osteopathic medical school in Florida and established Southeastern College of Osteopathic Medicine, which opened in 1981 to 40 students. The school prospered and eventually founded enough colleges to become a university.

In 1989, nearing retirement, Terry worried about Southeastern's future and sought to merge with another university for stability. After failed discussions with the University of Miami, Terry spoke to Abe Fischler, then Nova University's president. But they didn't agree. Fischler's position was that Nova should be head of the school while Terry didn't want Southeastern to be subject to an authority.

This changed years later when Terry went to the inauguration of third Nova president Stephen Feldman. According to Ray Ferrero, who was chair of Nova's board of trustees at that time and later became the fifth president, Terry wrote on a piece of paper (general agreement says it was the back of the inauguration program) the guidelines for a possible merger. Terry gave the paper to David Rush, who was a member of the board of trustees of both Nova and Southeastern.

Rush then gave the paper to Ferrero, who presented the plan to the Nova board and also spoke to Feldman about the idea, who accepted it. That was the start of the merger, which was completed in 1994. Nova University and Southeastern University of the Health Sciences merged to become Nova Southeastern University.

Today, Ferrero credits the merger to the foresight of both boards.

"I often say to anyone who asks that that merger defied modern math. One and one didn't make two," Ferrero said. "It made 10 because both institutions prospered by it and we can see it every day."

Expanding facilities

Ferrero's presidency started on Jan. 1, 1998 with roughly 14,000 students. During his presidency, he grew concerned that Nova was not properly serving nontraditional students, who were enrolled in evening programs around the state.

To fix this, student education centers were established throughout Florida. Eventually, the new Health Professions Division started nursing, physician assistant and other programs. When this happened, the student education centers went from being open

mainly during the evenings to open all day, as they are now, though they're called regional campuses.

“Now we're using them essentially from 11 in the morning to 11 at night,” Ferrero said. “The significant part about that is the fact that we were servicing our students the way they deserve to be serviced and we have staff there to help them, and they are in the kind of facilities that are really good for a learning environment.”

As the student population and the number of academic programs grew, it became apparent that more student facilities were needed on the main campus as well. Ferrero took action. During his presidency, from 1998 to 2011, about 2 million square feet of buildings were added to the main campus, including the Maltz Psychology Building, the Alvin Sherman Library, the Carl DeSantis Building, and the Don Taft University Center.

Establishing student life

With an increasing number of students came the need to solidify that growth with traditions and extracurricular activities. Enter Brad Williams, who passed over opportunities to work in at Florida State University and the University of South Florida and was hired in 1989 to establish and oversee student-centered initiatives.

“[Nova] said, ‘We've never done anything. There's really no campus life. That would be your responsibility,’” said Williams.

When Williams started, there were 550 undergraduate students, and Williams got to know every one of them. Williams called being the only person in charge of student affairs “crazy” and “fun” and he wore many hats.

“I would get up in the morning. I'd put on my coat and tie and come to work. At 10 in the morning, I'd take off my coat and tie, put a golf shirt on and some shorts because I'd be in front of the Parker Building flipping burgers because we were doing a picnic. I would go over to one of the residence hall rooms, take a shower, put my coat and tie back until 5. And then at 5, I would take my coat and tie off and put a referee shirt on and go out and ref football on the fields—which really weren't even fields; they were just scrub grass,” Williams said.

By the end of Williams' first year, the number of student organizations went from six to 30. The next year, Williams starting holding leadership conferences in places like Key West, Islamorada and Captiva Island, gatherings where students were “like family.” The few following years also brought the start of the Greek system and the revitalization of student government.

According to Williams, traditions arose organically at Nova. Today's "Anything That Floats Raft Races," a homecoming tradition, started when students decide to have canoe races on Gold Circle Lake, which used to extend to the Miami Dolphins training facility. Doing the "Fins Up" pose started when students started forming fins with their hands after the school's mascot became the Sharks.

"We were starting things all the time," Williams said. "People would come and say, 'Hey, why don't we ... ?' and we would just start it and see how it would go."

Today, there are 341 student organizations and Williams is the vice president of the Division of Student Affairs, as well as the dean of the College of Undergraduate Studies, which together have about 120 full-time employees and 40 graduate assistants.

Williams sees Student Affairs as an integral part of moving NSU into the future as the division helps students create a sense of identity by providing ways for students to get involved on campus.

"College is the totality of the experience," Williams said. "It is the richness of what you learn inside the classroom and the way that [what happens] outside the classroom complements all the things you learn inside the classroom."

Looking to the future

From farm to naval airfield to a university with three buildings, NSU has emerged, grown and gone to places no one would have thought it would go to 50 years ago. By the end of Ferrero's presidency in 2011, NSU had about 28,000 students, and it is now the ninth largest not-for-profit, independent university in the country.

NSU is moving into the future with the same innovation and optimism that has shaped its last half century and that is characterized by George Hanbury's Vision 2020, which he introduced when he became president in July 2011: "By 2020, through excellence and innovations in teaching, research, service, and learning, Nova Southeastern University will be recognized by accrediting agencies, the academic community, and the general public as a premier, private, not-for-profit university of quality and distinction that engages all students and produces alumni who serve with integrity in their lives, fields of study, and resulting careers."

Vision 2020 is NSU's driving force, the complement to its mission, and the goal of fulfilling it is ongoing, as students, staff, administration and faculty take part in the effort to become a better and greater "one NSU." As Williams notes, the "uni" in

“university” means “one”—one university and not a collection of “colleges and schools with nothing in common.”

“When it all comes together,” Williams said, “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.”