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Oral History Interview with Ronald Frank: Conceptualising SMU

Ronald FRANK

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Singapore Management University

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Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Professor Ronald Frank

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 19 August 2011

Location: Emory University, Roberto Goizueta Business School recording studio, Atlanta

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Patricia Meyer: Today is Friday, the 19th of August 2011. I'm Pat Meyer, and I'll be speaking with Professor Ronald Frank, who served as the second president of Singapore Management University from 2001 to 2004. This interview is taking place at Emory University, the Roberto Goizueta Business School recording studio, and is part of the 'Conceptualising SMU' oral history project'.

Today we'd like to ask you about your recollections and perspectives from your time as president of SMU. I would first like to start and ask you to back up and tell us about your career before you had any contact with SMU.

Ron Frank: The first sort of twenty years of my career had been teaching, publishing, writing, scholarship, consulting. The latter twenty years it shifted more to administration. When I was at Wharton, I started out as a non-tenured associate, a year later I was tenured, two years later I was a full professor. And then a few years later I got asked to be a department chairman. Somehow people keep asking me to manage things, so I was a department chairman. And then the dean asked me if I'd be associate dean for research and PhD programmes; Wharton has eleven of those. So I did those for two years, maintained my sanity, became an associate dean, finished at Wharton.

And then finishing at Wharton, I was interested in becoming a dean, so I wound up dean in a public university— Wharton being at the University of Pennsylvania, private—at Purdue [University], at the Krannert School [of Management], served dean there for five and a half years. And then along came this place called Emory University which had the Emory Business School at the time. Was asked if I would be interested in it, and it looked like an excellent opportunity to build an institution, so I wound up saying yes. Came here, served as dean for roughly eight and a half years till mid-1998. During that time, in 1994, the school was named for Roberto Goizueta, and we started on the venture of building on a new facility for it. Left Emory [retired from Emory in 1999].

I keep kidding people, I've retired twice. I retired from Emory, late in 1999. Had fun in that retirement. But just as that was happening I got a phone call from a Janice Bellace—whom I'd known at Wharton, Janice was a law school faculty member—asking if I'd be interested to serve on a board of trustees. A board of trustees for something called the Singapore Management University, which at the time, technically didn't exist, at least not as a public entity, and not an incorporated entity. It sounded fascinating; I said yes. And that's sort of a rapid-fire description of the path.

Patricia Meyer: How were you recruited for president of SMU? And why did you decide to take up the job as president, what were you interested in?

Ron Frank: Well, again, been on the board. I was about a year, year and a half in. And I don't really remember if it was either Janice or Kwon Ping that made the call that asked me if I'd be interested.

Well, I had seen the board close up and seen what was happening. At board meetings I would often come in (cough) a week or more before and do some consulting for Janice, interviewing people on staff; people on faculty; giving advice as schools were starting to develop, and some of the other functions were beginning to be developed, finance and human resources and the like. So I had a pretty good understanding of the institution and the people, and I liked the people a lot. That's one of the things, maybe we can get to a little later. But the staff, the students were attractive. The students weren't there when I started, but there were there shortly thereafter. But I was confident of the people.

I had seen indirectly, a year and a half of experience with the commitments that Singapore had made to the university, which to my knowledge, they kept throughout my presidency, and throughout subsequent presidencies. And those commitments involved a substantial amount of resources.

In some ways, I'd argue Janice and I had the best possible set of conditions you could imagine to try to create a new university—not that it wasn't a challenge—but nonetheless, you couldn't ask for more favourable conditions in a government and in a country.

Patricia Meyer: When you became president in September 2001, the university was just admitting its second intake of students, and it was now occupying the renovated Bukit Timah campus. Can you just tell us a little bit about what the campus and the university was like at that point when you started?

Ron Frank: Well, the campus then was in a very idyllic setting. You were surrounded by a fair amount of open park land. The campus was two quads that shared a common side, so you had inside quad space, nice grassy plains for students to be active in and whatnot. All the facilities were first-rate, even restaurants for the students were built and were first-quality. So we had sort of a community unto ourselves. First-rate facilities. I came in where we already had the first group of students—and one thing I know for sure—we had an incredible, enthusiastic student body, and that was an incredible amount of fun. But it's a reflection of the spirit, and if you think of a student body coming into a new university, most students in the world come into a university and say, "Gee, I want to join the marketing club or the finance club." And there's a club, and in fact, they get handed it on a tray: "You want to join? Go to the next meeting." Well, if you're a student, and it's a brand-new university, and you say that, well, people like me look at the student and say, "Well, you'd better form a club, because there isn't any club, and it's supposed to be a student activity and responsibility. We don't feel particularly comfortable in managing the creation of a club because it ought to be what you want it to be." "Oh." Well, rather than say, "Take a hike," the students went super active, and before long, we had a lot of clubs, with, I'd say, minimum faculty supervision, and they worked out pretty well. And that's a rare event.

Patricia Meyer: And what were your major responsibilities, as you became president?

Ron Frank: So number one, there's a junior class that need to get recruited. There are faculty that need to get hired for that purpose. If that's going to get done, they need deans. Two

schools existed—accounting and the business school—and Janice had gotten those in place. But they sort of needed more support in their recruiting activity. But there was a proposal, which I don't think was officially approved when I became president, for an economics and social science school. But there was no dean, and no search process for a dean. So one of my immediate tasks was to find a leader for that school.

I mean we were growing at a rate, in staff and faculty, of around a third a year. And one of the issues that I was concerned about, and still am as the university develops, is the pace of development. Because, when you start it, here you are, adding students and years to a programme, and you're adding sort of a third of the content to the programmes in one fell swoop, and recruiting all the faculty, and getting the curriculum for that. At the same time, there's two new schools going on, and there isn't magic to print people who are academics who have the competency to manage all that process. So, we were thin on the management side, I would say, in those years. Again, a credit to the faculty, the staff, and the students—a bunch of compulsive workers—a lot of sweat equity was put into that university by every possible constituency that was involved: students, staff, the faculty, the administration, even the board, as it got more swept up in the affairs of the university. It was unreal.

Patricia Meyer: Could you just tell us about how you went about helping develop a university that's right for Singapore?

Ron Frank: Well, I would argue that is still in process, not over. When the university started, they had done a deal with Wharton, to provide initial guidance, curricular materials, even the manuals for appointments and promotions and whatnot. And if you think of Singapore—who's always in a hurry—that's not a bad thing to do, because if you waited for that template, it would take years before you'd start and have actual students. But the downside of that is it encourages people to take as given a set of practices born in a different institution, in a different society, at a different point in time. Now, maybe all that's right. But if you think it through yourself and conclude it's right, great! No problem. But if you've never thought it through yourself and just bought it blind, I got a problem with that.

An example of that would be the University of Pennsylvania does not have a freestanding school of information systems, on a bet. Decision Sciences is what it's called—and I think is still called that—is a department at the Wharton school, it is not a freestanding school. Well, for what we envisioned we needed a freestanding school, and we needed the freedom to create an educational architecture that wasn't modelled after anybody. The conception that was provided by the faculty committee, and by the first dean, Steve Miller, was a halfway house. Computer science departments—good on the software and the technology, kind of poor on the management application side. Management types who teach computer science—or say they teach computer science—know something about the management side, but aren't usually really good at systems development and implementation. The idea was to build a middle ground. That wasn't an idea borrowed from somebody else, it was an idea conceived of looking at a field and looking at its needs. That's was the spirit that I was after as president. And stayed after throughout the three years.

Patricia Meyer: You've talked about this a bit already, but can you just tell us some more? There was a rapid hiring process underway for both faculty and deans. What were some of the

challenges of recruiting people to a new university in Asia?

Ron Frank: Well, one of the challenges that I'll bet is still going on—because I've been out of touch for a while—it turned out, that if you really aggressively recruited, you could attract assistant professors. That was not a major problem. The deans might say it was a major problem, but I wouldn't say it wasn't a major problem, because it got done, it got it done well. But trying to attract people at the level of full professor, senior associate professors, was a tough nut. Because once you get somebody embedded in their own society, their own culture, their own university—most universities in the US will let somebody take leave for a couple years. But if you stay longer than a couple years, it's over. You lose tenure, you lose your rights. That made getting senior people very difficult.

And that really gave a challenge—once more, people came to the fore. Because you had people at the level of associate professor, some of them untenured, sometimes assistant professor, who were doing things that normally you would want full professors to do. Because relatively young folk in the university—my model is, don't load them with a bunch of committees and activities, let them work their teaching, let them work their research, let them come up to speed and be ready for it. We couldn't do that. No way could we pull that off. So a lot of junior people got involved in that.

Patricia Meyer: During that same time there was debate in the media about SMU's marketing campaign... Want to share your reflections on that?

Ron Frank: You have a new university, and you want to get attention. And you've got two existing universities, and you feel things are kind of staid. And you really do believe that the students and their enthusiasm affects how much they're willing to learn for themselves. So you want to encourage enthusiasm on the part of the student body. You want people who are enthusiastic to think of the university. How do you do that? Well, by golly, those jumping jacks worked just fine! I thought it was just great. And if the world wants to debate it, fine. That gave us a tremendous amount of free publicity.

Patricia Meyer: As you took on the presidency, what were your thoughts on the types of undergraduate education that SMU should be delivering?

Ron Frank: Dave Montgomery used a phrase that I like a great deal, I think captures a great deal. There ought to be balanced excellence between research and teaching. That the research—at least in part, not completely—should be integrated into the teaching, that you should try to provide students opportunities to the extent you can. When you get four, five, six thousand students, you can't do that every time, to everybody, but you try to do it as much as you can. My sense is you want to balance the sort of theory, methodology part with practice, but you don't want purely practice, because you want students to be continually looking at existing practice and saying, "Why? Why is it that way, why couldn't it be this way?" And if they aren't 'why'-ers all the time, and 'but if'-ers all the time, they're likely not going to be particularly good leaders or managers.

So we wanted to build a capacity to make decisions on the part of the students. We also wanted a climate that would increase their self-confidence. Because again, my impressions—which may be wrong as an outsider—is that the family structure in Singapore is students, or children—'seen but not heard' is going too far—but fairly passive

in their relative roles, and in business fairly passive in junior positions. We wanted to create a bunch of non-passive, creative human beings who would ask the 'but ifs' and 'whys' of Mum and Dad, and of their bosses, tactfully and politely, but would have something to say that might be a better idea. We wanted to encourage it in them.

One way to do that is the case method. Using cases and using the design of the classrooms to get the students used to learning from each other, and talking to each other, and finding out that they too could think through a problem—without somebody called a faculty member taking them step-by-step through that problem—and they were capable of exercising that muscle and doing a decent job, even though, heaven forbid, they were undergraduates. So that the classrooms, not only was class-size [important], but the more important thing in those classrooms for me is they're U-shaped and they're banked. Which means, if you design it right, anyone in a given chair in a classroom, by pivoting the chair, can go eyeball-to-eyeball with any other student. If the acoustics are right, no matter where the faculty member is, no matter where anybody else is that's speaking, everybody else can hear at the same level. If you want to have that kind of peer-learning, you need those architectural and acoustic characteristics, and you need a pedagogy, a teaching style, that encourages the kind of behaviour you're after.

Patricia Meyer: Did you have the chance to hear any student feedback or concerns or ideas of what they thought about this new education?

Ron Frank: Yes, one of the things that we worked—starting at around the middle of the three years or towards the end—we did a survey of the entire student body and their attitudes toward teaching and every other aspect of the university environment. And that was done with data for every school, for every programme. And the data was provided to all the deans and the senior administrators so everybody would see the strengths, but we collectively would face the weaknesses. And there were some weaknesses, there were some pockets where the teaching was not at the quality that it should be. Not really tuned in to the students as undergraduates, so some corrections had to get made. There was also trying to pace the expansion of clubs. And I mean these kids were involved, and they were ahead of us all the time. Well, you can help them develop clubs, and require some funding, but some things are harder to put together than others are. Like if you want to have trips to other countries frequently, that doesn't fall off a log easily. So kind of pacing those, developing the competence to engage in that kind of activity.

Other things I think that made a major difference, weren't so much me, it's the generosity of givers. Singapore when I came, did not have a history of people reinvesting in the society, of gifting, of charity. And I firmly felt, in a university that wants to emulate a private university—in the short run it may not make much difference, the state may be paying the bills—but in the long run, the long-run consequences of not developing an endowment, and sheltering its income and using it wisely, qualitatively can change the trajectory and accomplishments of a university, loud and clear.

Patricia Meyer: Are there any examples of how SMU benefitted from being autonomous?

Ron Frank: Oh yes, I would say materially. It would have been, I think, difficult to get the quality of deans that we brought to Singapore that were capable of decentralised management and capable of their expectations of leadership on the part of a dean, if we had been required

to very narrowly construe what the role of a dean was, and what the role of a president was, maintaining power. The way a US university works. In a sense I would argue that the role of a president is to put a president out of a job. You want to delegate with first-rate people everything in sight you can. You got to monitor, your responsibility, if it goes wrong, it's your head. Fine. But you don't hang on to it. That's a US model, to much more extreme than I think prevailed in Singapore at that time.

Admissions, our admissions programme, again the advertising programme you've talked about. I don't think at that time you would have a prayer in an existing Asian institution, Singapore or not, of doing that kind of activity and bring it into being. But, staff, okay, you're going to have several hundred staff. What's the job of a secretary? Now that is a world in which you can define jobs and talk about what their responsibilities are, and do assessments of the value of those jobs in the organisation. It requires a lot of paperwork to build a performance-driven salary structure. We went through that transition. That's not part of a typical government operation. It usually is last year plus n-percent. So all that got mapped in to the practices of the university.

The arm's-length hiring of deans, doing global searches as part of the standard, sort of the gold standard of appointment. But it takes time, and people weren't used to investing either the amount of money or the amount of time to try to get the best possible person for that task, rather than, "Here is a circle of the people who are very loyal, I'll pick the best person there." Loyalty's a wonderful thing, I'm not deriding it. But if the larger world provides you a discernable difference in depth of experience and breadth, my book is, you go outside.

- Patricia Meyer: Can you just generally describe some of the issues that group, the strategic issues advisory committee, might have dealt with?
- Ron Frank: Another issue we had some discussion about was the importance of getting a law school as part of the university. If you looked at what's called a cognate—kind of an intellectual connections between disciplines and how they enrich each other—make a strong argument that the law school provides a cognate-tight connection—or can—to business, to accounting, information systems, even to parts of the arts and sciences. And having it missing was like having a piece of a puzzle where the other pieces were not as tightly integrated as they could be, because you didn't have a law school participating as part of the community. And Woody, an attorney, dean of the law school [at Emory University], was a natural to make the case.
- Patricia Meyer: I just want to ask you some questions, just looking back over your association with SMU and looking ahead. Could you just reflect on how your experience being at Singapore Management University in Singapore compares with experiences at universities in the US?
- Ron Frank: In SMU, the students were the most enthusiastic group of students, the most involved group of students in doing things that needed to get done, sometimes even if they weren't normally student activities.
- Patricia Meyer: And, I think, from your vantage point as president or past president of SMU and your association with Singapore, just some comments on how tertiary education has developed

in Singapore and what SMU's impact has been.

Ron Frank: Well, part of the issues was, is it really credible? Are Singapore students really going to be different when they graduate? Well, I left when the first graduates hit the street. Even by then—I don't remember his exact words—but Tony Tan and probably others in the leadership of the country, the deputy prime minister of the country, was making comments about how successful what they thought of as an experiment when they started would be, and they had agreed to change the governance of the other two established universities, and give them the same independent status we had, hoping for the same results. But nonetheless, to shift their sense of governance, to try to give them the ability, if they chose to, to emulate many of the practices—and many of the admission practices and academic practices that we initiated were repeated, replicated by our worthy competitors. So, SMU had had an impact not only by its own graduates, but its effect on other institutions, and its effect on the government's confidence.

Patricia Meyer: And finally, any advice for SMU students?

Ron Frank: Just remember when you're done, the platform you stood on when you walked through that door was those other generations, and the people in the government, and people who built that institution. And through your life, you owe them one. How you pay that debt is up to you, though you aren't compelled to do anything. But you ought to think about what you can do, whether it's volunteer activity—doesn't have to be for SMU—any kind of activity to help your fellow man and help your society. That debt continues, even though the education, formally, may be coming to an end.

Patricia Meyer: And, anything else you might want to add, any other areas?

Ron Frank: One of the joys having been dean in two institutions and president in SMU, for me, is to look back. Sure, I have an ego, I'm pleased with what happens when I was in office, and all that nice stuff. But what really gives me joy is to see what's happened since, and that things have stayed in place, and that the institution is of higher quality; better staffed; better, broader in its offerings, in its competencies; than it was when I left. It just kept on progressing.

End of Interview

Acronym

Definition

MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NUS	National University of Singapore

PhD
SMU
US

Doctor of Philosophy
Singapore Management University
United States