

ASTRID MERGET  
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
FEBRUARY 19, 2014

Q. Good morning. I am Leslie Fine. Today is February 19, 2014, and I am interviewing Astrid Merget, whose birthdate is?

A. It is August 25, 1945.

Q. Okay. Thank you very much. Astrid, could you describe the positions you held or the roles you played at Ohio State, in what units and over what time period, please?

A. Sure. I came to Ohio State in 1986. I was recruited as the Director of what was then called the School of Public Administration, within the College of Business, and I also held the title Associate Dean of the College of Business. That was in 1986. We did change the name of the school within a year or two, and it became the School of Public Policy and Management. Roughly I would say about '89, '90 – I'm a little foggy on precise dates – the Dean of the College decided to step down, and there was the issue of the Interim Dean. And I was appointed as the Interim Dean roughly, again, I can't quite remember – '89, '90 to '91. And I served in that position about a year and a half. And then I went back to the role of being Director of the School of Public Policy, and I did share [leadership of] a commission – there were three commissions on women in the early '90s – and the one I shared was on pay and equity. At the end of '93, I took a leave and left for Washington, D.C., to join the Clinton Administration, and then I resigned from Ohio State in the late spring of 1994.

Q. Okay, thank you. Can you talk about your family, your background, and your experiences that shaped you prior to coming to Ohio State?

A. Yes, I'm not sure it's quite, well, let me address it as I would address that question. I would say up to '82, '83, '84, if you had told me I would be at Ohio State I would have said, "You're out of your mind." I was married, happily married to a professional. We both found careers in Washington, D.C. So for a two professional couple it was an ideal place, and I never considered leaving it. Tragically, my husband died very suddenly, and over a period of time I really re-thought my career and the areas in which I wanted to live. I made up my mind that I wanted to be an academic, not a government person, and because academic institutions outside of Washington were more interesting than the institutions in Washington.

Q. Do you know what specifically made you change your mind about becoming an academic?

A. Yes, it was partisan. I'm a Democrat and to be in government in a political position, which I had been in during the Carter Administration, that was not going to work during the Reagan Administration, and it appeared that the Republicans, in addition to having eight years of Reagan, would probably succeed Reagan. And so I decided that that did not make sense to stay in Washington, that I had always been torn between being in the world of action and being in the world of academia. So I decided being an academic administrator – I had become Chair of my department at George Washington University – was something I liked doing, and positions were opening up and I was courted by Ohio State. I had heard through the grapevine that they were doing really good things, that it was an extraordinary institution that I ought to look at, at least. The first year I turned them down and said, "No way," and the second year I thought, "Well, let me at least look at it."

- Q. So George Washington University was actually your first academic experience?
- A. No, it actually wasn't. My first academic experience was at Barnard College at Columbia University in New York, and I left there, again feeling the dualism between being an academic and being an action oriented person. The election of Jimmy Carter opened the door for a fairly high-level political position for me. And then after some time, I decided, you burn out in jobs like that, and I was recruited by GW, and so I went there.
- Q. In what ways do you generally identify yourself in terms of how you see yourself as well as how others see you, with regards to things like gender, race, sex, religion, class, politics, etc.?
- A. I certainly think I identified as a woman without a doubt, in part because of the generation that I'm part of. I was the first woman Chair of this. I was the first woman Chair of that, and I think it was a time when there was interest in diversifying. There was pressure to diversify and I was one of the handful of women in my field who were becoming senior.
- Q. Did you ever get tired of being first?
- A. Yes, I did.
- Q. What other variables, Astrid, besides gender?
- A. Pardon me?
- Q. What other variables besides gender?
- A. I had the right academic pedigree for my field. That was a springboard. It also had an incredible alumni network and we sort of took care of each other, if you will.
- Q. How specifically has being a female shaped your life?

A. It is what I am. Again, I think some of it is generational. I went to a women's college because women could not go to the Ivy League, so I went to a women's Ivy League school, one of the old seven sister [college]s as it were. I grew up at a time when there were clear-cut barriers to what women could do. In this day and age if I were applying to college, I would apply to many – perhaps many different kinds of colleges – but at that time I couldn't. Secondly, I'm the daughter of a feminist. My mother was a woman who thought women could do whatever they want. And the men in my family were very supportive of that. So I chose a really great women's college, and that indoctrinated into me that we women could achieve. There was not just marriage as an option. There were many options. And there were many pathfinders before me who were graduates of Mt. Holyoke. So it was very much instilled in me from an early age.

Q. And related to that, how have any of your other identities – how you view yourself – shaped your life?

A. I think the other one is because I have been in professional schools, whether it's public administration, public policy or business administration, that I could cross-walk the world of practice into the world of academics.

Q. In terms of what happened to you at Ohio State specifically, how did being a woman shape your experiences here at Ohio State?

A. Again, I realized I was a first. I was the first woman who was Director of the School, although it was a very young school. It didn't have a long history. I was probably the first woman to be in a Dean's role, either as an Associate Dean or, I think there had probably been an Associate Dean, but certainly as an Interim Dean. There were very few women in senior positions at the University. There was the Dean of Human Ecology. There was the

Dean of Nursing. There was a Vice Provost, and more women came, but when I arrived there were very few.

Q. So when you arrived, were those women helpful to you? Did they reach out and mentor to you, or was it sort of every woman for herself?

A. No, they clearly reached out and they have in one or two cases been life-long friends.

Q. Can you name any of those people who have been life-long friends?

A. Yes, Francille Firebaugh, who was the Interim Provost when I was hired. And then she was not selected as the permanent Provost, but she became a Vice Provost for International Affairs. Some years later she moved back to Cornell University and at that point I was at Syracuse University. And so we renewed our relationship, both professionally and personally, and we have kept in touch.

Q. Oh, good. So did any of your identities shape your experiences at Ohio State?

A. I'm having a little trouble with the word identity.

Q. I think given this project, people are kind of free to interpret this any way they want. I think the beauty of this project is that people talk about themselves in ways that are meaningful to them personally.

A. Well, certainly gender is one. I don't know if it's the over-arching one. When I think of my career and being competitive in my career, I think there were other factors, and as I said the one – particularly being in a professional school – is that I think I have had, and I think I'm honest about this, because I've gotten feedback about this, I can cross-walk sitting in the halls of government and being in the academic world.

Q. Do you think the climate when you got here ... was your School and the College at the time, what was the climate like for you?

- A. The College was going through a real transformation on the business side of elevating research over consulting. There were still some older faculty members who had made their careers heavily on consulting, and so the direction was going to go more into more traditional research, research that was considered research, not just consulting as it were. So it was going through that transformation. It was going through another transformation of, were they going to build up the MBA program and make that the centerpiece, or were they going to focus on the undergraduate program and the Ph.D. program? So there was a lot of soul searching about what directions the College was going to go in, let alone being in the horrible facility that it was in. Basically a building falling down – Hagerty Hall. So there a lot of issues that were percolating in the College, and I think they started to explode a little bit when the Dean left. They came really popping out in terms of, what are we looking for in a new Dean?
- Q. So in terms of that, when you think about the other women in the unit when you were here, how was it like for them? Was it the same as it was for you? Was it different than it was for you?
- A. I think it was really hard on them. They were few in number. I don't know, and this is a factual question and I'm answering it impressionistically. I'm not sure there was another full professor in the college who was a woman. I don't believe there was. There were women who had been tenured but relatively young in their tenure, so they wouldn't have been poised to be promoted to full professor. But I cannot remember a woman who was a full professor.
- Q. I'm going off script here but I just want to ask, was Martha Cooper here when you were here?

- A. Yes, she was.
- Q. My guess, Astrid, is she would have been the first full, the first woman to reach full [professor] while she was here.
- A. Could well be, but I don't know that it was when I was there.
- Q. Oh, maybe not. It may not have happened until later.
- A. I think it happened later. She was in marketing, if I remember.
- Q. She was in logistics, right. She just retired.
- A. Did she really? That makes me feel ancient. Thinking about these women and knowing that Deb Ballam is retired. I couldn't believe that. At any rate, she, **Marsha Matelly** early 90s, Arnon ... I can't remember her last name.
- Q. Arnon Reichers.
- A. Yes. None of them was a full professor, I don't think.
- Q. Probably not when you were there. I'm guessing Marsha was not. I don't think Arnon ever got to be full. Sue Josephs never got to be full. **Nina Latack** left.
- A. I don't even know her.
- Q. I don't think there was [a female full professor at that time].
- A. And, of course, they were scattered across, so often they were the only one in the department or one of two. The men, the department I'm speaking of – well, you can do with it what you want – [the department where] men were just really sexist was Finance. They were just awful that way.
- Q. Were there women in finance at that time, do you remember?
- A. I know they were considering some women but I don't know that there were. And I can't remember where Law was. Law was perched with another department. It was not free-

standing. And I just can't remember if Finance had Law because if it had Law then it had a woman. But I just can't remember that.

Q. When I arrived here, Law and Finance were together, but I'm sure that that had always been true.

A. It was true when I was there, I think, because Law was lodged with another department.

Q. Historically, it had been with Finance.

A. It was a very inhospitable place.

Q. Okay. And you had mentioned Francine, but besides Francine, can you discuss any other mentors you had at Ohio State?

A. Yes, Lena Bailey, who was the Dean of Human Ecology and has since died.

Q. And how did she help you?

A. They [Bailey and Firebaugh] showed interest. They showed interest and we would periodically meet for lunch. I should add another one, Joan Huber. She eventually became Provost but she was Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Q. Yes, I know Joan well.

A. Right, and we would talk. We would periodically, one on one, have lunch together or visit together or have side bars when I became Interim Dean. At Deans retreats or Deans meetings and so forth. I don't know that we explicitly talked about sexism. I think it was the unspoken reality, if you will.

Q. Yes. So this is a good transition. While you were at Ohio State, can you describe the concerns you had, either in the unit or at the University about equity issues and how you became aware of those equity issues.



A. Well the equity issues were evident in the numbers. Having come from the east, women, and particularly New York and Washington, women were very represented comparatively. They still had miles to go, but there were a lot more women and a lot of talented women, and I guess I was shocked at how few women there were in senior positions at Ohio State.

Q. So were there any other specifics, besides numbers, were there any other specific issues or incidents that really made you aware of what faculty issues there were at Ohio State?

A. Yes, how would I put it? I was a candidate to be Dean and I probably should not have [been a candidate]. I should have had better sense than that. But I was pushed by some women to do that and I also thought, "It's time. Let's see. I've been in the business college at GW, let alone at Ohio State and I've been the Interim Dean. If I'm good enough to be the Interim Dean, maybe I'm good enough to be Dean." It was sort of that logic. And I thought, "I owe it to myself to find out." And I wasn't chosen. That was sort of a disappointment. By the same token it was totally understandable. The pool had people in it who really had credentials in the business field and as academics. It was what happened afterward that said to me, "I'm leaving this place." The President, who was relatively new, thought that I should become his Special Assistant on Women's Issues, and I thought, "What a slap in the face that is. My field is public affairs, first of all. I have been in the Business College. I've been an Interim Dean. I'm not going to be your staff flunky on women's issues or your token."

Q. Do you think that was viewed by the person who offered that to you as a reward?

A. No, I think it was a consolation to get me out of the College and out of the way of the new Dean.

Q. Oh, wow.

A. Oh, I'm convinced of that.

Q. These are some things I didn't know about while I was here. I'm learning a lot here.

A. There's no question about it. How would I put it? I don't think of myself as aggressive or in your face or any of that, and I wasn't that kind of a feminist; I was of the '60s variety and style, but I think there was concern that I knew a lot about the business college and I would be in somebody's way. By going back to being head of Public Affairs, we got into a fight that was unbelievable, because it was seen that the Public Affairs program, the School, had special treatment. It was only graduate [students], teaching loads were relatively lower in the sense of the number of students taught, and that sort of thing. And that Dean went after that School and I thought, "To hell with that. I've had it with this. I'm going to go someplace where not only am I appreciated but my field is appreciated."

Q. So this question I think is related to, and you may have already described this, but if not, I'd be curious. Can you talk about the most powerful experience you had at Ohio State?

A. Yes, I just named it.

Q. Okay, I was wondering.

A. It was the fight for survival and I thought at some point, after about two years of that, I thought, "I've had it. I'm a fighter but not that kind of fighter."

Q. While you were here, did you personally work to affect institutional change around equity issues?

A. As I said, I chaired this commission. There were three – if I remember correctly – commissions that dealt, if not just with women and the issue of diversity, and I can't remember the other two. And we filed the report and this, that and the other. I'm really

hazy about what was in that report because documenting equity, certainly in salary and compensation, is very difficult to do in an academic setting because of the incredible differences by discipline and the disciplines that are female-dominated relative to those that aren't. That's not Ohio State's problem; that's the field's problem kind of thing. And it's so subjective after that. You're dealing with, how do you assess the worth of an individual? Very difficult to do.

Q. So how did those efforts affect you personally?

A. I think it made me angry at the plight of women in higher education at Ohio State.

Q. So were there allies, people who were not in what we consider the "diverse" groups? Were there allies who supported change?

A. Men, you mean?

Q. Yes, I guess from your perspective it would have been just men, right?

A. I don't know that there really were. I don't think there were any hostile activities. I think they thought, "Well it's just a token commission, or a token this, let it go."

Q. So there wasn't any overt obstructionism?

A. No, no.

Q. Okay. I think the questions shift a little bit. This is more general. In your career, were their collective efforts around change that you participated in or observed throughout your career?

A. To promote women?

Q. Well, just as collective efforts around change. I'm guessing they want you to interpret that change in ways that are meaningful for you.

A. I always feel like I've been brought in, after I left Ohio State, I left to become Associate Dean at the Maxwell School [of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University], and then I became Dean at Indiana for seven years – the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, and then I came here [Louisiana State University] as Provost. It's one of those jobs that has embedded in it whether you are a woman or a male holding it, that there will be change. That whatever the specific issues are in the particular institution. They may be curricular; they may be financial. Change has always been a theme, working through and how do you change, and sometimes it's more radical than others. Academic institutions change at a snail's pace. They do. You look at them 20 years later and say, "Oh my God, they have changed," but you don't see change that much on an annual basis.

Q. That's interesting because the next question is, what do you think remains undone relative to the progress of women and diverse groups at OSU now?

A. I think what really has startled me, truly startled me, and I think they still have a long way to go, and this is not the Business College, this is Ohio State: You had a fabulous – in my judgment – woman President, Karen Holbrook. And I believe from what I understood that she was sought out, and she was the Provost at Georgia, and that's how I got to know her. She did not fit the image or did not, I guess, cultivate or play to several members of the Board, and then they go back to Gordon Gee and they've just named [in 2014] a new President. There are phenomenal women out there. That's not an issue anymore. Ten years ago scarce. Twenty years ago very scarce. That's not the case anymore. And I just see, they're just going to perpetuate males in that job. They had their token woman and there it goes.

Q. Very interesting.

A. That's how I read it. I think she was really good academically and I know that from a couple of Deans, but she probably didn't play, she didn't have the personality of a Gordon Gee.

Q. So at your level you get to observe this group of players, the way that many of us don't, because we don't have reason to know them or interact with them. So you can speak about women coming into those roles. What about people from other diverse groups? What about gay people or black people or Hispanic people? Do you see them treated in the same way for these positions?

A. Yes. I do. I sort of see this, and I guess, let me preface that, I've become older and even thought I have been "successful," if you look at my academic career. But I've gotten angrier over time, because right now the pipeline has a lot of people in it who are really talented. That is clearly true of women. There are women Provosts out there. And I think that's increasingly true of African Americans. I don't know about Hispanics. Certainly the pool is a lot smaller when it comes to African Americans or blacks, whatever the proper term would be. But it is growing and it is there. And I just see the recent spate of appointments as white male.

Q. Are there any other formal topics that you wanted to talk about that we did not cover?

A. I do think the demographic changes and the fact that there is a pipeline and more women and more people of color and diversity in that pipeline, are going to eventually change things. I really do. You cannot say they are scarce anymore. But I think it's going to take a long time and part of the problem is the Boards and the extent to which their calculus is.

Q. From your view, and I know you're looking at Ohio State from a distance, what do you think our Board is most interested in?

A. Raising money and raising private money, which I think is true of almost every major university. I just don't fault Ohio State for that. I think they're in the game and they're in the game big time and they should be. I totally support that. But I think they underestimate what women can do that way. I really do. You look at the most recent President of Michigan, Mary Sue Coleman – she was a master at fund raising. And the same is true, the most recent President of MIT. Master fund raiser. I think women have terrific talent that way, and it's not just boys on the golf course.

Q. Do you think the Boards have to change in order for the people who are appointed to President's positions to change?

A. Yes, probably.

Q. More women and more diversity on these Boards?

A. Absolutely.

Q. What will make that happen, Astrid?

A. I don't know. I wish I had an answer. It depends on who appoints. It's the governors or it's the alumni associations. In the end, it was the combination of governor appointments and election by the alumni association.

Q. Do you have any memorabilia that you think would be useful that you might be willing to let the Archives copy?

A. You mean pictures or whatever? No, I don't.

Q. Okay.

- A. By the way, I do not walk away from Ohio State bitter. It could have happened in many other institutions, what happened to me. I am bitter about how the School was treated as I moved out of being the Dean and back into being Director. They wanted it out. It went on a diaspora. It was Behavioral and Social Sciences for a period of time, and then miraculously became joined with the Glenn Institute. That was just a horrible experience.
- Q. I remember a lot of those people who were there at the time. You guys had a lot of young people leaving.
- A. Exactly.
- Q. A lot of young faculty, right?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Leader **Patty Barnes**. I remember those people.
- A. Oh yes, I think a lot of us saw the handwriting on the wall. And my successor, who was internal, and had more of a pugilistic personality than I, he threw in the towel and said, "The hell with that." There were many, many years that were lost.
- Q. Do you think there are other people the project should interview?
- A. I think you have to interview Francille Firebaugh. You have to interview her. She's back in Columbus.
- Q. Spell that name for me, please?
- A. F-r-a-n-c-i-l-l-e F-i-r-e-b-a-u-g-h.
- Q. I'm making a note. When they interviewed me, they asked me about people that they should talk to. And I think we're trying to get various collective wisdom around this, because everybody knew different groups of people.

- A. Sure. Francille was the Interim Provost in the mid-'80s, has had a great career. She's retired. She retired from Cornell a couple of years ago and moved back with her husband to Columbus. There are two other women who were a little more junior than I, but really have had explosive careers, who were at Ohio State for really long periods of time, and you should know about them, if you don't. One is Judy Genshaft.
- Q. I'm pretty sure people have talked to Judy, because her name has come up. In fact, Deb may have interviewed her.
- A. And then Nancy Zimpher.
- Q. Yes, she's clearly on the radar, too.
- A. For sure those two women. They were a little bit behind me, not much, and then they left. Actually, Nancy became Dean of Education and then she left. But Judy left a couple of years after I did.
- Q. I'm pretty sure those are names that Deb [Ballam] would have immediately thrown into the mix. And in fact, Deb told me she interviewed people herself and I thought maybe she said Judy was one of them, but I'm not positive.
- A. I wouldn't be surprised. And if I think of any others, oh yes, of course the Dean of Nursing, Anderson.
- Q. Carole Anderson. I'm pretty sure she's already been included too, but I'm making a note just in case. I think Carol just retired too.
- A. She did other projects for the University. She hasn't been Dean for a while as I recall.
- Q. They moved her around different places that needed help. But I think for a while she was over at Dentistry. I think they really needed some help over there, and I think she stepped in over there for a while.



- A. That squares with sort of my understanding.
- Q. But I used to see Carole quite a bit because we don't live that far from one another. But I haven't seen her recently. I don't know if they're traveling. I used to see her more than I do now.
- A. And those are the people I think of at this point in time. Lena Bailey was the other but she tragically succumbed to cancer and died. Of that generation, let me put it that way. And we're not the elders, for God's sake.
- Q. Would you be willing to interview somebody for the project?
- A. I don't think so. I left Ohio State and even though I have very, very fond memories, I left in '94. I've been gone 20 years.
- Q. Right, if you don't mind, I'm going to turn off the microphone, but there are a few things I want to tell you, but off record.
- A. Okay, absolutely, that's fine.