TRANSCRIPTION RE:

CSUMB Founding Faculty
Oral History Project 1995-98
Rina Benmayor, Project Director

Interview with David Takacs, Associate Professor
Earth Systems Science and Policy
Science, Technology and Information Resources Center/College of Science

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Payne Adler: My name is Frances Payne Adler, and I am introducing David Takacs for the CSUMB Founding Faculty Oral History Project. The date is May 31, 2019. David is San Francisco and I am in Portland, Oregon. So, thank you, David, for agreeing to participate in our project. And do we have your permission to record and videotape this interview?

Takacs: Yup.

Payne Adler: Okay. Would you please just say your full name and what your position was at CSUMB? What year you arrived? And left?

Takacs: Sure. I arrived in 1996 as an Assistant Professor and I left in 2005 as an Associate Professor.

Payne Adler: And your full name is…?

Takacs: Oh. David Takacs.

Payne Adler: [Chuckles] Okay, all right. So I’m going to ask you some questions and it’s just going to be a conversation and wherever you want to take it, I want to hear all about it.

Takacs: All right.

Payne Adler: So, you know, a lot of us have a story about how we first learned about CSUMB. Can you describe what that moment was for you?

Takacs: Sure. I earned my Ph.D. at Cornell in 1994 and I had a very nice job that was actually created for me as a writing instructor at Cornell. And I was very happy there. And there was interesting personal life stuff going on when at some point I had to start thinking about, for personal life reasons, looking for a job on the West Coast. Which I didn’t actually want to do but that was beside the point. And one day I was looking at the Chronicle of Higher Education and I saw the listing for Cal State Monterey
Bay, explaining what it was and what is was trying to do. And I thought, well, the idea of starting a new university and living on the coast of California, which I’d never thought about before, sounded too good to be true. And I knew that I had no chance of actually getting one of these positions but I thought that both I could show “personal life” that I was looking for a job on the west coast as well as using it as an opportunity to present a vision for what I might want with the rest of my life as an educator, I thought, “Okay, I will put together an essay and send it off and never hear anything again.” And that was that.

[3:18] Payne Adler: And is that what happened?

Takacs: No, that’s not what happened! So I think it was probably February of 1995, if I’m thinking correctly, I wrote that essay, sent it off. I didn’t hear anything until late May or early June. All of a sudden I got a call from Bill Head, who was the Founding Chair of the department that was called Earth Systems Science and Policy [ESSP], inviting me out to Monterey for an interview. I was in total shock at this phone call, as you can well imagine. And I thought, “Well, I actually don’t want the job but what the heck? I had lots of friends who lived in Santa Cruz and Berkeley and San Francisco and it was a great chance for somebody else to pay for me to come to California. And it’s also a good chance to have a practice interview and actually to think about the same things that I thought about in the essay.” So I said, “Sure, I’ll come out for an interview.” And I did.

Payne Adler: So what was it in the ad that drew you other than the location?

Takacs: The location was a minor thing. The major things were two-fold, I’d say. One was, wow! starting a new university and thinking about what education for the 21st century would actually be and what role I could play. Well, that’s … who gets to do that? That’s a pretty fascinating challenge for any person interested in education. And the second was, they were describing the Vision of the University which was to try to prepare 21st century leaders particularly focusing on students who had been historically disadvantaged from opportunities in higher education and elsewhere in society and that was to be one of the focuses of this new University. And I thought that the Vision that was being proposed sounded too good to
be true and the chance to be part of that or at least to write an essay, an application essay toward that goal
was a really good opportunity to think about my connection to that goal. So that was really what drew me
to sit down and compose an essay on that and apply.

Payne Adler: So the essay. Do you remember some of the points of your vision for starting a
university? What would a university look like? What were your ideas that you put in your essay?

Takacs: I don't remember. [Laughter] I guess … I don’t even think I have a copy of that essay
anywhere. The things that I remember were. . . there were a few different points I believe I made. One was
the role of environmental training, awareness, citizenship, science as being necessary for any 21st century
leader to have some kind of understanding and appreciation of basic environmental literacy.

[6:32] Another was the fact that . . . I have both an undergraduate degree in Biology and a Ph.D. in History
of Science, so a Humanities degree, and that I could teach across the curriculum . . .

[technological interference]
so I could teach science and I could teach the humanities and I could teach the interrelation between those.
And I could teach writing and I could teach critical thinking because that’s what I was actually doing at the
time at Cornell. And I also wrote about why I was interested in teaching students from historically
disadvantaged or marginalized groups and how that was an incredibly appealing prospect for me to engage
in that kind of activity as opposed to the kinds of students that maybe I was teaching at Cornell, who I also
loved but they did not tend to be from historically disadvantaged or marginalized groups.

Payne Adler: Right, right.

Takacs: And I think those are some of the points that I made in my cover letter, in my essay.

Payne Adler: So...I’m really interested in the points you were making in your essay as far as ...
because this was 1990...?

Takacs: 1995 was when I applied. Yeah.
Payne Adler: So and now we’re at 2019. I’m trying to think. What were some of the ideas that were floating around environmental justice and ... you know, I mean I don’t think we were using the word climate change, then.

Takacs: We were although no one was paying attention to it. But we were talking about environmental justice at that time. This was a hot topic. The environmental justice movement began in the 1970’s, picked up steam in the 1980’s. President Clinton had issued an Executive Order in the early part of his administration mandating that environmental justice concerns be a part of every decision that was made as … in the federal government, especially for those having to do with the environmental movement. So it was very much was on people’s minds at the time.

Payne Adler: And how did you see teaching “first-in-their-families to go to college” students as related to environmental justice?

Takacs: I’ll back up a little bit and say that – one of the things I did say in my essay, and just to complete that thought which is going to get to your question, was I am a first generation college student and recognized… I had gone from a terrible public school system to Cornell and had no understanding of how to function in college when I got there. So, I very much understood the struggles that first generation college students faced. And I’m also gay, which I wrote about in the cover letter as well, and understand. . . . That doesn’t necessarily mean I know what a student of color in California is going to face or a straight student of color, but I do know what it is like to come from some kind of marginalized group. And so I at least have an empathy and some kind of awareness and understanding of struggles that students who are not mainstream might face. So, in California in 1995, knowing that we were on our way to becoming the country’s first majority/minority state, that is to say the first state where the majority of citizens or residents were people of color, that the future of the environmental movement depended upon the participation of representatives from all walks of California life including what their concerns were vis a vis the environment. That the environmental movement is not just about preserving pretty places and endangered
species, important though that is, but also thinking in terms of clean air, clean water, disproportionate impact of toxics, etc., etc. So I wanted to be part of . . . any environmental science/policy curriculum had to incorporate those concerns which weren’t always a fundamental part of that kind of curriculum.

[11:38] Payne Adler: Right, right. Thank you. Yes. So now let’s go to campus. Do you remember arriving on campus and what were your first impressions?

Takacs: Right. So I arrived on campus. I think it would have been June, 1995. I didn’t start my job until the summer of 1996. We can get to that in a second if you care. But there was –

Payne Adler: [Laughs] I care.

Takacs: There was – there was essentially nothing—it was just a bunch of derelict buildings. This was before the first students had arrived . . . so this was before the doors had even opened. And so, you kind of arrived on this derelict army base and I had directions to what was going to be the Watershed Institute. And that’s where my interview was. It certainly didn’t look anything like Cornell. [Laughter] I thought, “Okay, well this is kind of interesting.” I just remember it was this really foggy, gray day and you arrive in the middle of these falling-down buildings. It was like, “Well, this is kind of interesting.” So that was my first impression: “This is going to be . . . this is kind of strange.” I pulled up to the Watershed Institute. Now it’s this brightly colored [building]. There’s this beautiful, ornate, gorgeous mural. But then it did not have that. It was just this kind of random squat little building in the middle of nowhere. And that was my first. . . “Okay.”

Payne Adler: Okay. And your interview? How did that go? Who was there?

Takacs: I was thinking about this the other day. The only people I remember in the room were Bill Head, who was the founder of this Earth Systems Science & Policy program, and Josina Makau, who was one of the founding faculty, who was one of the original core faculty that was picking the people that would come subsequently and starting to prepare the Vision. And I don't remember who else was in the room. There were about six faculty in the room. I simply cannot remember who they were.
So I’ll tell you two different things. Sometimes you bumble your way through public talks or through interviews. And sometimes you find yourself in the zone where every word that comes out of your mouth you are kind of thinking in the back of your head, “Wow, that was a great answer! Where did that. .?” And so I think in part because I didn’t particularly want the job, I wasn’t trying to get the job, there was no pressure, no stress, I was not nervous. And for an hour I had this – trust me, I’ve had really lousy interviews before – this was not a lousy interview. This was a terrific interview. I remember, and I can picture, even though it was 14 years ago, I could picture Bill Head sitting there with his stone face, like you were getting nothing back from him, and I remember Josina sitting there and everything I said she was like nodding her head.

Payne Adler: [Laughs]

Takacs: And so [after] an hour. I was ushered out. And then I went to my rental car that was sitting on the street. And I put my head on the steering wheel, and I said [whispering], “F***, you’re gonna get this job!”

Payne Adler: [Laughs]

Takacs: And then I went and I talked to Cecilia Burciaga. . . I don't remember exactly what her position was in 1995. I think she was the Executive Assistant to the President. I talked to her and that was that. So I was in and out in two hours. It was like it had never happened! Off I went to visit a friend in Santa Cruz. And I thought, yeah, and that was that.

Payne Adler: And you got the job.

Takacs: Yeah. And then about two weeks later I got a phone call from Bill Head offering me the position. And he said, “Can you start next week?” Or, “Can you start in two weeks?” And I said, “No. I have this position at Cornell.” This was late June of 1995. The school year at Cornell, for my second year in this position, started in mid-August. This position had been created for me. I had a contract. They were treating me in a wonderful way. I said, “No, I can’t walk out of a contract when I’m supposed to start
teaching for my second year. So no, I can’t do that.” He said, “Can you start in January?” I said, “No, I can’t start in January. I can start summer of 1996,” a year from then. And I sort of was hoping that he’d say, “Well, you can’t have the job. So he said, “We’ll get back to you.” And then he got back to me and he said, “Okay, we’ll hold the position for a year.”

Payne Adler: Yeah, yeah. Okay.

Takacs: And so I accepted.

Payne Adler: Did he say why they wanted you?

Takacs: [Chuckles] Students were about to arrive. [confirming video connection]. This was late June of 1995. The first students were arriving, I believe, in August of 1995. They needed warm bodies to be there, teaching those students.

Payne Adler: Right.

Takacs: I think anyone who was offered a position that year, they wanted to show up immediately. And that was that. Yeah.

Payne Adler: So you were hired as what? What was your job?

Takacs: So, this particular program was called Earth Systems Science and Policy [ESSP]. The goal of the program was to teach biology, geology, physics, chemistry, all in an environmental context, all connected, thinking about the Earth as one giant system but also connected to being able to apply the science that you were learning to pressing policy issues, to be able to take the “is” of science to the “ought” of “what do we do with all the information, how do we make enlightened decisions about our environmental future?” And that was the vision, this very, I thought, excellent vision of this program, and I was on the “P” end of Policy. I was supposed to be teaching the environmental policy courses. I don't think that they knew what that meant and so part of the role of anyone who was coming to join this program was to define what this actually meant.
Payne Adler: So what surfaces for you, a story about when you first met your students, your first class?

Takacs: Right. So this was a year later. So we have to jump ahead to a year later. I showed up in June of 1996, spent the summer helping to build out this program. Because at the time, there were only three professors in my particular program and there were going to be eight or nine or something like that. So the first class of students were... some of those students had been there for a year already, they were the pioneer students. And some of the students were starting in the second year. And they were not the students I was used to in a very good kind of way. First of all, anyone who shows up at this brand new campus, these were pioneers. These were adventurers. These were students who were willing to take a chance. They were delightful. They were smart. They were diverse. One of the things I loved about CSUMB students is that not only were they representing disparate populations, not only were they Latino and Asian American and African American, but they were also nineteen and twenty nine, and forty nine, and sixty nine [years old]. The population of students I was used to teaching at Cornell were the eighteen to twenty-two year-olds, very traditionally aged students. Mostly white. Mostly well off.

[20:43] And so it was delightful to encounter such a group of diverse students who were not shy about participating in class, were not shy about contributing their life experiences and their opinions. So it was a different species of students than what I was used to. I also had to get used to... California is very different from New York. And I had to get used to [sigh] a California vibe in the classroom which was different from a New York vibe. And so that took a little bit of getting used to.

Payne Adler: What was the California vibe? [Chuckles]

Takacs: You know, I grew up in New York and I was used to being a little bit sarcastic or ironic or snarky and California students don’t get that. So I had to like tone myself down a little bit. And that was fine. That was delightful as well. And yeah, so that was my first impression, was that this was different in a very exciting way. Different who our students were [sic].
Payne Adler: *So California students were not snarky. What were they?*

Takacs: They were sincere.

Payne Adler: *Oooh.*

Takacs: Sincere is the overwhelming word. Down to earth. What came out of their mouth was what they meant and thought. It was a delight – it was refreshing. Sincere is the best possible word I would use to describe the students that I encountered at CSUMB.

Payne Adler: *So we’re talking in generalities now.*

Takacs: Yes.

Payne Adler: *Is there a specific student that comes to mind that, you know, some moment in a classroom at the beginning that made you come to the conclusion how sincere they were or down to earth?*

Takacs: The first year I was mostly teaching ESSP students, that’s the science students.

Payne Adler: *ESSP stands for …?*

Takacs: Earth Systems Science and Policy. I understand the current name of that program is different but it’s still the same idea. The first year I was teaching those students . . . I later was teaching General Ed [first and second year] students as well, so I was getting more of an experience with the rest of the students at CSUMB. . . . I mean you came to this program because you had a very strong environmental consciousness and you wanted to use this education to effect change in various different communities, whether it’s your home community or the greater community of whatever ecosystem you were in. And so there was just a sense of dedication, and fervent dedication which continued all throughout my experience in ESSP. That didn’t change. That was always the students that we were getting in that particular program. And actually that seems to be the kind of students that many of us in all the different programs were getting. These students tended to be dedicated to changing their communities, to working in their communities, to make their communities better, more sustainable, more just, more whatever places.
Payne Adler: Yeah. And a particular student come to mind? Even one after the beginning? Not just when you got there but perhaps somebody whose capstone you were involved in? . . . I’m hunting for stories, Dave.

Takacs: Oh, you’re hunting for stories. Yeah. I mean we had a lot of students. One of the things about CSUMB which I’m sure is coming out in your interviews is the connection between Service Learning and the rest of the curriculum. So I had a number of students throughout the years especially including at the beginning who were doing service projects. For example, there is a place in the Central Valley outside of Salinas called the Rural Development Center. The Rural Development Center’s goal, which has also changed its name in recent years, but the Rural Development Center had a program to train Latino immigrant farm workers, a three-year program that would help them transition to becoming independent organic farmers. So not working on somebody else’s farm for whatever wages, but becoming . . . And so a number of our students did their service learning there and then did their capstones there. Sometimes a kind of social justice capstone, sometimes . . . I had one student who was looking literally at the quality of vegetables from that organic farm compared to a neighboring non-organic farm. I had a number of students who would do science education capstones where they were working in local community schools, which were primarily schools that catered to, that served students of color, doing environmental education curriculum, science education curriculum connecting student communities, hands on student work in their communities. So those were the kind of things that these students got interested in, preparing them for subsequent careers as educators or subsequent careers as working in agriculture or pollution control.

Payne Adler: So I want to go back to the Vision. This was at the center of the University. And it was being defined as we started the University. Do you remember being a part of co-creating it or having input into it?
Takacs: I didn’t. The Vision existed by the time I arrived on campus. So the Vision was this … but words on the page don’t necessarily mean anything until they’re actually put into practice. So I’ll give you two different ways that I played a major role in implementing the Vision. . . . [technological interference] The second year I chaired the committee that defined how CSUMB was going to implement the California State University’s General Education Requirements. So we had what we called ULR’s, University Learning Requirements. This was a chance to take the Vision and put it into practice. What is our General Education program going to look like? A second way was, you have a science program situated in a University whose Vision was fundamentally committed to social justice. Well, what does that mean? Most science programs, that’s not their central concern, whereas at CSUMB that was supposed to be one of the central concerns of any of our programs. So those are two [examples]. I didn’t have anything to do with the original Vision but more the role that I played, like so many people who arrived in 1996, “Okay so we’ve got these words on the page. What does that look like in requirements? What does that look like in the classroom? What does that look like into our pedagogical approaches? What does that look like in the way we relate to students?”

Payne Adler: So you were a part of writing the original requirements for the environmental –

Takacs: And for the General Education Program for the entire University.

Payne Adler: So what did that look like in terms of environmental issues?

Takacs: It meant in addition to having to master the various different sciences and understand the relationship between the sciences, it meant understanding how those sciences connected to concerns of disparate communities. That’s really what it meant. First of all, I’d say two different steps here. First of all, the whole idea that we didn’t just want to study science but we wanted to apply it to pressing societal needs, that itself seemed to be a reflection of the Vision. That we were community focused. We were problem-solving focused. So the fact that you connected the science to policy in the first place, I think,
came from the Vision. But that adding the extra twist of “and we were concerned about social justice issues” was an extra part of how the Vision got reflected there.

[29:47] Payne Adler: So in the Vision, one of the aspects of the Vision was interdisciplinarity.

Takacs: Right.

Payne Adler: And your ESSP program was... Can you talk a little bit about that.

Takacs: You know, usually an undergraduate is going to come to college and if they are interested in the sciences they are going to be a biology major. Or they’re going to be a chemistry major. Or they’re going to be a geology major. They are not going to study biology and geology and chemistry and the technological applications thereof, and the applications to policy. So that was ... we were asking for a lot in a quintessentially interdisciplinary kind of way. And the faculty came from Ecology and Technology and Chemistry and me, from my diverse background. So you had people from all of these different disciplines working together, creating a curriculum and trying to educate students in some kind of a holistic comprehensive way.

Payne Adler: And how did that work in reality on a day to day basis? Did you feel that it was effective that your colleagues were working in an interdisciplinary way?

Takacs: Yes, but. I worked with mostly lovely people in ESSP. CSUMB attracted a particular kind of person with a particular kind of dedication and if you were a scientist who just wanted to go off and be a scientist and have a traditional science career you wouldn’t have come to CSUMB. So people came predisposed to want[ing] to do that kind of work with each other and with students. That didn’t mean that [it] was easier, that any of us knew exactly what we were doing. And so trying to create a curriculum where students could actually graduate in four years and fulfill the goals of the University was challenging. There were challenges there. There were challenges working with the rest of the University. I felt that [pause] there were some ways that my colleagues in the Sciences did not understand some of the goals of the University and some of the goals that were expressed in the Vision. And I felt that there were colleagues in
the rest of the University that did not understand or appreciate the role of science in solving pressing
problems or in helping to make for 21st century problem solvers and leaders. So I felt very much in the
center of being able to communicate these different languages back and forth between science faculty and
non-science faculty and that was a challenge on both ends in some cases.

[33:02] Payne Adler: You used the word challenge. I want to ask you to be more specific.—

Takacs: About that challenge or about other challenges?

Payne Adler: Well, where we are right now. We’re talking about challenges both internal to ESSP.
So can you be more specific? And not only within ESSP but within the relationship to the rest of the
University.

Takacs: [thinking, sigh] Yeah. I think that there were tremendous challenges. Starting a university
from scratch without enough time to get really going, with limited resources, with students who came to us,
many of them had gone through K-12 education in California in under-funded schools, showing up on
campus without the skills that one might have wanted . . . literacy and numeracy skills that one might have
wanted them to have. So if you’re going to be a science major you have to have a certain level of
competency coming in if you’re going to get through in four years. Many of our students didn’t have that
level of competency. At CSUMB we talked about an assets model of education as opposed to a deficits
model of education. It sounds like I am talking about a deficits model of education in terms of what our
students lacked, but the truth is that even in the sciences many of our students came in without great skills
ready to tackle college level science and math work. So, trying to get students out in four years was a
challenge, particularly when you are teaching them all of these different sciences and particularly when you
have a demanding general education set of requirements on top. So that created stress. And that created
difficulties. Even among my colleagues, trying to figure out how do you do all of this and incorporate all of
the other stuff that the University wanted because our General Education requirements were also quite
demanding. I also felt that many of my colleagues outside of the sciences had just this fundamental distrust
of science and scientists. I felt that throughout my time at CSUMB, and I felt a kind of tension between my department and the rest of the University. I felt like I was in the middle of trying to be the translator back and forth and that wasn’t always an easy position to be in.

**Payne Adler:** Yeah. Yeah. What about the relationship between administration and faculty? Did you feel that administration was supporting your work and the Vision?

**Takacs:** I felt that for the nine years I was at CSUMB many of the administrators in key positions were either incompetent, malevolent or both. I felt that CSUMB hired very poorly when it came to many if not most of the positions of authority. And I felt that that was part of the utter dysfunction of the place.

**Payne Adler:** Hmmm! When did you first start feeling the dysfunction? Was there a turning point of some kind?

**Takacs:** First of all, even if [we had had] the most amazing ever, competent, functional, lovely administrators, the fact that, as we used to say all the time, you were building the bicycle as you were riding it, was going to create dysfunction. The fact that we hired mostly junior faculty, showing up with their first university professor position trying to create classes, at the same time that there weren’t actually requirements for both majors and for general education; at the same time that there were hardly any buildings; that there was not enough lead time before the first warm bodies showed up on campus. So that was going to create dysfunction no matter what happened. So in our first years there was just tremendous stress. And you’re working seventy-, eighty-, ninety-hour work weeks because you’re not only designing courses, teaching students, mentoring students, at the same time you’re designing majors, at the same time you’re designing an entire University’s curriculum.

**Payne Adler:** Yeah!

**Takacs:** That was tough. So right from the beginning it was just overwhelming. And sometimes it was overwhelming exciting and sometimes it was overwhelming depressing and difficult. So it became
clear early on that people in key positions … [sigh] … were unlikely to be helpful or competent at being helpful even if they were inclined to be helpful.

Payne Adler: *Whoa! Big sigh there! Big sigh there! So tell me about that sigh.*

Takacs: Well, [pause] Do you want to ask a more specific question?

Payne Adler: *I heard this big sigh. And a sense of disappointment.*

Takacs: Yeah. So, I’m going to back up. I’ll back up. First I will say all the wonderful things, a lot of good things. I did really wonderful work with students and met wonderful students who are now out in the world being leaders and leading wonderful lives as citizens. And I did great work with them and I learned from them and they learned from me and that was wonderful. I met some lovely colleagues from whom I learned a tremendous amount. I learned a lot about power and privilege and race and class that makes me a much better teacher and much better citizen that’s led me to my current job [law professor]. I’m much better at my current job because of it. I came to CSUMB with some considerable teaching experience but I really learned how to teach and learned a lot about student learning at CSUMB. There were some just wonderful things that happened at CSUMB.

[40:40] My overwhelming feeling about my time at CSUMB is one of *extreme* disappointment. I was extremely unhappy for most of the nine years I spent there which was why I left after nine years. It was a deeply dysfunctional place that did not show any signs of getting better, which is part of why I left. There was a lack of competent leadership that was dismaying and I should say that my academic position before CSUMB and the one I hold now, I understand what it is to be in a functional work environment with competent leaders and lovely colleagues where excellence is prized and nurtured. So it’s not that I’m just a kind of a dissatisfied person in general. My CSUMB experience has been sandwiched with really wonderful learning environments and environments where I can be an excellent professional. I had some lovely colleagues but also some very difficult uncollegial colleagues which made life difficult in some way, particularly when we were supposed to be collaborating towards shared goals. So it felt very much like just
about every day was a struggle for nine years. Except when I was in the classroom with students, in which case that was always lovely. Although the overwhelming struggle, the ‘caca’ that was going on outside sometimes, was actually difficult, because teaching as a professional, you have to constantly be renewing yourself in order to be able to have something to offer to students. That got increasingly difficult over the years. I felt it was just a very pathological environment. I remember the campus – the head of the campus counseling service who said several times it was the most pathological work environment she had ever experienced. And I felt that very vividly for the entire time I was there. So that hit very early on, this realization that this place was, that it was always gonna be tough to create a new university without enough lead time or enough money, but it was a whole lot tougher than it actually needed to be. Which is why I eventually left.

[43:37] Payne Adler: Do you remember what the triggering incident was? Sorry to use that verb.

Takacs: Where I made the decision to leave? Yeah. I had this one-two punch in the Spring of it would have been 2004. I left after the Spring of 2005 because I wanted to give a year’s notice. I didn’t want to just leave everyone high and dry. I made the decision Summer of 2004 that I was going to leave. I had this one-two punch. There were just a whole bunch of things that happened. But I had one incident where I had a meeting with my Department Chair who was not Bill Head, t was not my Founding Department Chair, I loved Bill, I met with my Department Chair and my Dean. I had found out that I was the lowest paid faculty member in my Department. I don’t even remember how I found that out. So I met with my Department Chair and my Dean. And my Department Chair said the reason I got such great student evaluations was because I knew [could identify] their students’ writing and they were afraid to say anything mean about me. [pause] And that was, to me, an epitomization of the dysfunction of CSUMB. And then I had these four capstone students that Spring, that had done wonderful, wonderful social justice-based science work. And if you are going to do social justice-based work there will be political positions or value positions that come out. And at a capstone festival they [students] did these dream presentations that many
of my colleagues didn’t like because they were kind of explicitly political. And it was this crystallization of
the vision that I had for this program, it just was never going to work. And if you situate that in the
dysfunction of the broader University, I had this epiphany that over the long run I didn’t see a future for
myself there and I had to get out and do something else. And so that was that. Yeah.

Payne Adler: Wow. Thank you for sharing that. And you are now at?

Takacs: I gave a year’s notice. I quit my job and I went back to law school in my forties. I said I
have certain certain cares and values about both environmental preservation and social justice and that I
had to find a different means to realize those values in a professional setting. And I quit my job and went
back to law school [technological interference]. I had never ever thought about going to law school, but I
studied to become an … environmental lawyer. In a way I still don’t understand how it happened! I am
now a law professor at University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco where I teach
a range of environmental law classes and very happily. So, yeah.

Payne Adler: Wow.

[47:22]  Takacs: I’ve never had any career objectives. You know, there are people in the world who, they
want to do this and then they want to advance to that. I never had any of that. I would happily have stayed
at Cal State Monterey Bay the rest of my professional life if I had felt happy and nurtured there. But I
didn’t. And so I felt I had to leave. So yeah, it wasn’t that I wanted to go and do something different or
better. It was that I just was pretty miserable in my professional life at CSUMB, so I just felt I had to get
out of there for my own health.

Payne Adler: So if you had some opportunity to give some suggestions for how it could have been
different or could be different?

Takacs: Yeah. Easy. Part of the founding story and I don’t even know how much of this is actually
ture, was the conversion of the military base to a university was masterminded by Leon Panetta who had
been a Congressperson and then was President Clinton’s Chief of Staff, is that right?
Payne Adler: Yes.

Takacs: And that part of the timing of the opening had to do with President Clinton’s 1996 reelection campaign. I think that’s true, but that’s what I’d always heard.

Payne Adler: I don't know.

Takacs: And so the timing, the rush, I mean when Fort Ord closed there was kind of economic devastation to the surrounding community. So there was a lot of community pressure to have this university there to try to reinvigorate local economies. But one thing that obviously I would have done different[ly] was you needed another year or two of lead time to get your ducks in a row before the first students showed up. Because that was guaranteed to be a disaster and to take a toll on faculty and faculty life. But also on students’ lives. You show up and you want to know, “Well, what do I need to do to graduate?” And we were like, “Well, we’ll figure it out.” So obviously, with that kind of rushed timing there was going to be dysfunction no matter what happened. I would have just hired different people in key positions.

Payne Adler: Key positions meaning…?

Takacs: Key administrators. Some of the administrators and faculty colleagues, I just can’t imagine why and how they were hired. And again, this is from someone who now works with fifty colleagues in my law faculty who . . . I can’t imagine how I was hired because they’re all such excellent professionals, excellent collaborators, excellent scholars, excellent teachers, working beautifully together. I’m the one that feels like, “My God, where did I come from?”

Whereas at CSUMB I just had this feeling that there was just a lot of really poor hires. So the combination of … the rush to open the doors to students before anything was in place combined with some really poor choices on collaborators, coupled with the fact that -- this is nothing that you can do here -- but coupled with the fact that California simply doesn’t invest in education, not only our K-12 but our undergraduate and ugraduate programs are terribly underfunded compared to where they were, for example, in the 1970’s. So it was always going to be a struggle because you have students who come to us
without the skills that you might want of college students. And they needed more resources, not less resources, in order to succeed, and they wanted to succeed. It wasn’t that they weren’t hardworking and ambitious. But we were under-funded and so that was always going to create both a competition for resources even among departments and faculty at CSUMB. But also if you wanted to help your students succeed as they wanted to succeed it would take an awful lot of your time and heart and effort. So that was part of the dysfunction as well. So I would go back to the 70’s and change the results of Prop 13 and school funding.

Payne Adler: [Laughs] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Is there anything that I haven’t asked you that you would like to add to this?

Takacs: Yeah, I do want to say… I am negative on a lot of CSUMB. Obviously, I left because I was unhappy there. But I do want to emphasize that I can point to dozens and dozens and dozens of students who because of CSUMB had a fantastic education and have gone on to lead excellent professional and citizen lives because of the way the Vision was actually implemented and because of the care of faculty, not just me but many other faculty such as yourself who really invested in them because they were so invested. There were opportunities created by CSUMB that these students would not have, I believe, found anywhere else especially not in a public education system. And so there were all of these wonderful things that happened there. In many ways it was, at the best of times, what education should be. Just it was always a struggle to get there. So I – so the lovely things about CSUMB were spectacular.

Payne Adler: So dozens and dozens of students. Can you think of one or two and what they’re doing? Are you in touch with some of your students?

Takacs: Yeah, I’m in touch with some of my students. They’ve gone on to, they do watershed restoration working in communities of color or local park development working in communities of color. Or they’ve gone on to law school and become environmental lawyers. Or all of the teachers that we graduated who came through with a sense of a social justice mission that they couple with their education.
And whether they are high school teachers or kindergarten teachers. One of the things that happened at CSUMB is Bill Head, the [founding ESSP] Chair, made it part of his mission to get underrepresented students Ph.D. scholarships and fellowships.

Payne Adler: Ah.

Takacs: We have gone on and graduated students who have gone on for science careers with fully funded Ph.D. programs that probably might not have happened without that kind of nurturing or mentoring. I have students from the sciences who went on to become psychotherapists. They work for the Department of Environmental Conservation in Alaska working with native communities. They’re just – there are all kinds of students who have gone on to do really interesting – and that’s just the science students I’m talking about, never mind students that I’ve worked with in other [majors].

Payne Adler: Right.

Takacs: I also taught the core science Gen Ed requirement for non majors. So I worked with non majors and helped to do some kind of science and environmental literacy for students that were going on to do whatever they were doing, whether it was becoming a creative writer or whatever. There are students who through this interdisciplinary social justice-infused curriculum, got a kind of education that they otherwise might not have gotten.

Payne Adler: Um hmm.

Takacs: So I don't want to leave on a totally negative note. I don’t. There were a lot of amazing things that happened there. It’s just that there could have been a lot more amazing things and I could have been a lot happier [voice drops off inaudibly] given the work that we all did together.

Payne Adler: Well, I want to thank you so much for doing this, David and being a part of our Oral History Project.
Takacs: And Fran, can I ask, are you going to just make all of these interviews separately available? Is it going to be somehow put together into a documentary? What’s going to happen with these interviews?

Payne Adler: You know, I think first of all it’s going to be transcribed and you will get to ... to read it and okay it.

Takacs: Okay.

Payne Adler: And then it’s going to be put into an archive. And Rina’s the Project Director so I’m not exactly sure of all the details but it will be available to the public. So I think it’s really important to document how we began and the Vision and the social justice commitment. I understand there are changes happening today and that the University has moved away from some of that. So all the more reason to document it and hold it on for people to know and perhaps use to self-assess and go forward.

Takacs: Great.

Payne Adler: Well, thank you.

Takacs: Great. thanks for spending the time with me.

Payne Adler: Oh, hey, it’s been a pleasure. And lovely to see you.

(END OF RECORDING)