

**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**

**Interviewer, Frances Payne Adler, Professor Emerita,  
Creative Writing and Social Action  
School of Humanities and Communication  
College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Transcribed by:**

**Carol Roberts  
(585) 259-2621**

**[carris.roberts@gmail.com](mailto:carris.roberts@gmail.com)**

Narrator: David Takacs  
Interviewer: Frances Payne Adler

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

5           **Takacs:** Yup.

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

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

10          **Payne Adler:** *And your full name is...?*

11          **Takacs:** Oh. David Takacs.

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

14          **Takacs:** All right.

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

17          **Takacs:** Sure. I earned my Ph.D. at Cornell in 1994 and I had a very nice job that was actually  
18 created for me as a writing instructor at Cornell. And I was very happy there. And there was interesting  
19 personal life stuff going on when at some point I had to start thinking about, for personal life reasons,  
20 looking for a job on the West Coast. Which I didn't actually want to do but that was beside the point. And  
21 one day I was looking at the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and I saw the listing for Cal State Monterey

22 Bay, explaining what it was and what is was trying to do. And I thought, well, the idea of starting a new  
23 university and living on the coast of California, which I'd never thought about before, sounded too good to  
24 be true. And I knew that I had no chance of actually getting one of these positions but I thought that both I  
25 could show "personal life" that I was looking for a job on the west coast as well as using it as an  
26 opportunity to present a vision for what I might want with the rest of my life as an educator, I thought,  
27 "Okay, I will put together an essay and send it off and never hear anything again." And that was that.

28 **[3:18] Payne Adler:** *And is that what happened?*

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

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

39 **Takacs:** The location was a minor thing. The major things were two-fold, I'd say. One was, wow!  
40 starting a new university and thinking about what education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century would actually be and what  
41 role I could play. Well, that's ... who gets to do that? That's a pretty fascinating challenge for any person  
42 interested in education. And the second was, they were describing the Vision of the University which was  
43 to try to prepare 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders particularly focusing on students who had been historically  
44 disadvantaged from opportunities in higher education and elsewhere in society and that was to be one of the  
45 focuses of this new University. And I thought that the Vision that was being proposed sounded too good to

46 be true and the chance to be part of that or at least to write an essay, an application essay toward that goal  
47 was a really good opportunity to think about my connection to that goal. So that was really what drew me  
48 to sit down and compose an essay on that and apply.

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

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

55 **[6:32]** Another was the fact that . . . I have both an undergraduate degree in Biology and a Ph.D. in History  
56 of Science, so a Humanities degree, and that I could teach across the curriculum . . .

57 *[technological interference]*

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

64 **Payne Adler:** *Right, right.*

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

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

68 **Takacs:** 1995 was when I applied. Yeah.

69

70           **Payne Adler:** *So and now we're at 2019. I'm trying to think. What were some of the ideas that*  
71 *were floating around environmental justice and ... you know, I mean I don't think we were using the word*  
72 *climate change, then.*

73           **Takacs:** We were although no one was paying attention to it. But we were talking about  
74 environmental justice at that time. This was a hot topic. The environmental justice movement began in the  
75 1970's, picked up steam in the 1980's. President Clinton had issued an Executive Order in the early part of  
76 his administration mandating that environmental justice concerns be a part of every decision that was made  
77 as ... in the federal government, especially for those having to do with the environmental movement. So it  
78 was very much was on people's minds at the time.

79 **[9:22] Payne Adler:** *And how did you see teaching "first-in-their-families to go to college" students as*  
80 *related to environmental justice?*

81           **Takacs:** I'll back up a little bit and say that – one of the things I did say in my essay, and just to  
82 complete that thought which is going to get to your question, was I am a first generation college student  
83 and recognized... I had gone from a terrible public school system to Cornell and had no understanding of  
84 how to function in college when I got there. So, I very much understood the struggles that first generation  
85 college students faced. And I'm also gay, which I wrote about in the cover letter as well, and understand. .  
86 . . That doesn't necessarily mean I know what a student of color in California is going to face or a straight  
87 student of color, but I do know what it is like to come from some kind of marginalized group. And so I at  
88 least have an empathy and some kind of awareness and understanding of struggles that students who are not  
89 mainstream might face. So, in California in 1995, knowing that we were on our way to becoming the  
90 country's first majority/minority state, that is to say the first state where the majority of citizens or residents  
91 were people of color, that the future of the environmental movement depended upon the participation of  
92 representatives from all walks of California life including what their concerns were vis a vis the  
93 environment. That the environmental movement is not just about preserving pretty places and endangered

94 species, important though that is, but also thinking in terms of clean air, clean water, disproportionate  
95 impact of toxics, etc., etc. So I wanted to be part of . . . any environmental science/policy curriculum had  
96 to incorporate those concerns which weren't always a fundamental part of that kind of curriculum.

97 **[11:38] Payne Adler:** *Right, right. Thank you. Yes. So now let's go to campus. Do you remember*  
98 *arriving on campus and what were your first impressions?*

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

101 **Payne Adler:** *[Laughs] I care.*

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

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

113 **Takacs:** I was thinking about this the other day. The only people I remember in the room were Bill  
114 Head, who was the founder of this Earth Systems Science & Policy program, and Josina Makau, who was  
115 one of the founding faculty, who was one of the original core faculty that was picking the people that  
116 would come subsequently and starting to prepare the Vision. And I don't remember who else was in the  
117 room. There were about six faculty in the room. I simply cannot remember who they were.

118 **[13:59]** So I'll tell you two different things. Sometimes you bumble your way through public talks or  
119 through interviews. And sometimes you find yourself in the zone where every word that comes out of your  
120 mouth you are kind of thinking in the back of your head, "Wow, that was a great answer! Where did that .  
121 .?" And so I think in part because I didn't particularly want the job, I wasn't trying to get the job, there was  
122 no pressure, no stress, I was not nervous. And for an hour I had this – trust me, I've had really lousy  
123 interviews before – this was not a lousy interview. This was a terrific interview. I remember, and I can  
124 picture, even though it was 14 years ago, I could picture Bill Head sitting there with his stone face, like you  
125 were getting nothing back from him, and I remember Josina sitting there and everything I said she was like  
126 nodding her head.

127 **Payne Adler:** *[Laughs]*

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

131 **Payne Adler:** *[Laughs]*

132 **Takacs:** And then I went and I talked to Cecilia Burciaga. . . I don't remember exactly what her  
133 position was in 1995. I think she was the Executive Assistant to the President. I talked to her and that was  
134 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  
135 Santa Cruz. And I thought, yeah, and that was that.

136 **Payne Adler:** *And you got the job.*

137 **Takacs:** Yeah. And then about two weeks later I got a phone call from Bill Head offering me the  
138 position. And he said, "Can you start next week?" Or, "Can you start in two weeks?" And I said, "No. I  
139 have this position at Cornell." This was late June of 1995. The school year at Cornell, for my second year  
140 in this position, started in mid-August. This position had been created for me. I had a contract. They were  
141 treating me in a wonderful way. I said, "No, I can't walk out of a contract when I'm supposed to start

142 teaching for my second year. So no, I can't do that." He said, "Can you start in January?" I said, "No, I  
143 can't start in January. I can start summer of 1996," a year from then. And I sort of was hoping that he'd  
144 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  
145 said, "Okay, we'll hold the position for a year."

146 **Payne Adler:** *Yeah, yeah. Okay.*

147 **Takacs:** And so I accepted.

148 **Payne Adler:** *Did he say why they wanted you?*

149 **[17:02]** *[technological interference]*

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

153 **Payne Adler:** *Right.*

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

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

157 **Takacs:** So, this particular program was called Earth Systems Science and Policy [ESSP]. The goal  
158 of the program was to teach biology, geology, physics, chemistry, all in an environmental context, all  
159 connected, thinking about the Earth as one giant system but also connected to being able to apply the  
160 science that you were learning to pressing policy issues, to be able to take the "is" of science to the "ought"  
161 of "what do we do with all the information, how do we make enlightened decisions about our  
162 environmental future?" And that was the vision, this very, I thought, excellent vision of this program, and  
163 I was on the "P" end of Policy. I was supposed to be teaching the environmental *policy* courses. I don't  
164 think that they knew what that meant and so part of the role of anyone who was coming to join this  
165 program was to define what this actually meant.

166           **Payne Adler:** *So what surfaces for you, a story about when you first met your students, your first*  
167 *class?*

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

180 **[20:43]** And so it was delightful to encounter such a group of diverse students who were not shy about  
181 participating in class, were not shy about contributing their life experiences and their opinions. So it was a  
182 different species of students than what I was used to. I also had to get used to . . . California is very  
183 different from New York. And I had to get used to [sigh] a California vibe in the classroom which was  
184 different from a New York vibe. And so that took a little bit of getting used to.

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

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

190 **Payne Adler:** *So California students were not snarky. What were they?*

191 **Takacs:** They were sincere.

192 **Payne Adler:** *Oooh.*

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

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

197 **Takacs:** Yes.

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

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

201 **Payne Adler:** *ESSP stands for ...?*

202 **Takacs:** Earth Systems Science and Policy. I understand the current name of that program is  
203 different but it's still the same idea. The first year I was teaching those students . . . I later was teaching  
204 General Ed [first and second year] students as well, so I was getting more of an experience with the rest of  
205 the students at CSUMB. . . . I mean you came to this program because you had a very strong  
206 environmental consciousness and you wanted to use this education to effect change in various different  
207 communities, whether it's your home community or the greater community of whatever ecosystem you  
208 were in. And so there was just a sense of dedication, and fervent dedication which continued all throughout  
209 my experience in ESSP. That didn't change. That was always the students that we were getting in that  
210 particular program. And actually that seems to be the kind of students that many of us in all the different  
211 programs were getting. These students tended to be dedicated to changing their communities, to working in  
212 their communities, to make their communities better, more sustainable, more just, more whatever places.

213 **[23:58] Payne Adler:** *Yeah. And a particular student come to mind? Even one after the beginning? Not*  
214 *just when you got there but perhaps somebody whose capstone you were involved in? . . . I'm hunting for*  
215 *stories, Dave.*

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

233 **[26:14] Payne Adler:** *So I want to go back to the Vision. This was at the center of the University. And it*  
234 *was being defined as we started the University. Do you remember being a part of co-creating it or having*  
235 *input into it?*

236           **Takacs:** I didn't. The Vision existed by the time I arrived on campus. So the Vision was this ...  
237 but words on the page don't necessarily mean anything until they're actually put into practice. So I'll give  
238 you two different ways that I played a major role in *implementing* the Vision. . . . [technological  
239 interference] The second year I chaired the committee that defined how CSUMB was going to implement  
240 the California State University's General Education Requirements. So we had what we called ULR's,  
241 University Learning Requirements. This was a chance to take the Vision and put it into practice. What is  
242 our General Education program going to look like? A second way was, you have a science program  
243 situated in a University whose Vision was fundamentally committed to social justice. Well, what does that  
244 mean? Most science programs, that's not their central concern, whereas at CSUMB that was supposed to be  
245 one of the central concerns of any of our programs. So those are two [examples]. I didn't have anything to  
246 do with the original Vision but more the role that I played, like so many people who arrived in 1996,  
247 "Okay so we've got these words on the page. What does that look like in requirements? What does that  
248 look like in the classroom? What does that look like into our pedagogical approaches? What does that look  
249 like in the way we relate to students?"

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

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

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

253           **Takacs:** It meant in addition to having to master the various different sciences and understand the  
254 relationship between the sciences, it meant understanding how those sciences connected to concerns of  
255 disparate communities. That's really what it meant. First of all, I'd say two different steps here. First of all,  
256 the whole idea that we didn't just want to study science but we wanted to apply it to pressing societal  
257 needs, that itself seemed to be a reflection of the Vision. That we were community focused. We were  
258 problem-solving focused. So the fact that you connected the science to policy in the first place, I think,

259 came from the Vision. But that adding the extra twist of “and we were concerned about social justice  
260 issues” was an extra part of how the Vision got reflected there.

261 **[29:47] Payne Adler:** *So in the Vision, one of the aspects of the Vision was interdisciplinarity.*

262 **Takacs:** Right.

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

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

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

274 **Takacs:** Yes, but. I worked with mostly lovely people in ESSP. CSUMB attracted a particular  
275 kind of person with a particular kind of dedication and if you were a scientist who just wanted to go off and  
276 be a scientist and have a traditional science career you wouldn’t have come to CSUMB. So people came  
277 predisposed to want[ing] to do that kind of work with each other and with students. That didn’t mean that  
278 [it] was easier, that any of us knew exactly what we were doing. And so trying to create a curriculum where  
279 students could actually graduate in four years and fulfill the goals of the University was challenging. There  
280 were challenges there. There were challenges working with the rest of the University. I felt that [pause]  
281 there were some ways that my colleagues in the Sciences did not understand some of the goals of the  
282 University and some of the goals that were expressed in the Vision. And I felt that there were colleagues in

283 the rest of the University that did not understand or appreciate the role of science in solving pressing  
284 problems or in helping to make for 21<sup>st</sup> century problem solvers and leaders. So I felt very much in the  
285 center of being able to communicate these different languages back and forth between science faculty and  
286 non-science faculty and that was a challenge on both ends in some cases.

287 **[33:02] Payne Adler:** *You used the word challenge. I want to ask you to be more specific.–*

288 **Takacs:** About that challenge or about other challenges?

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

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

307 of science and scientists. I felt that throughout my time at CSUMB, and I felt a kind of tension between my  
308 department and the rest of the University. I felt like I was in the middle of trying to be the translator back  
309 and forth and that wasn't always an easy position to be in.

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

312 **[36:14] Takacs:** I felt that for the nine years I was at CSUMB many of the administrators in key positions  
313 were either incompetent, malevolent or both. I felt that CSUMB hired very poorly when it came to many if  
314 not most of the positions of authority. And I felt that that was part of the utter dysfunction of the place.

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

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

327 **Payne Adler:** *Yeah!*

328 **Takacs:** That was tough. So right from the beginning it was just overwhelming. And sometimes it  
329 was overwhelming exciting and sometimes it was overwhelming depressing and difficult. So it became

330 clear early on that people in key positions ... [sigh] ... were unlikely to be helpful or competent at being  
331 helpful even if they were inclined to be helpful.

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

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

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

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

344 **[40:40]** My overwhelming feeling about my time at CSUMB is one of *extreme* disappointment. I was  
345 extremely unhappy for most of the nine years I spent there which was why I left after nine years. It was a  
346 deeply dysfunctional place that did not show any signs of getting better, which is part of why I left. There  
347 was a lack of competent leadership that was dismaying and I should say that my academic position before  
348 CSUMB and the one I hold now, I understand what it is to be in a functional work environment with  
349 competent leaders and lovely colleagues where excellence is prized and nurtured. So it's not that I'm just a  
350 kind of a dissatisfied person in general. My CSUMB experience has been sandwiched with really  
351 wonderful learning environments and environments where I can be an excellent professional. I had some  
352 lovely colleagues but also some very difficult uncollegial colleagues which made life difficult in some way,  
353 particularly when we were supposed to be collaborating towards shared goals. So it felt very much like just

354 about every day was a struggle for nine years. Except when I was in the classroom with students, in which  
355 case that was always lovely. Although the overwhelming struggle, the ‘caca’ that was going on outside  
356 sometimes, was actually difficult, because teaching as a professional, you have to constantly be renewing  
357 yourself in order to be able to have something to offer to students. That got increasingly difficult over the  
358 years. I felt it was just a very pathological environment. I remember the campus – the head of the campus  
359 counseling service who said several times it was the most pathological work environment she had ever  
360 experienced. And I felt that very vividly for the entire time I was there. So that hit very early on, this  
361 realization that this place was, that it was always gonna be tough to create a new university without enough  
362 lead time or enough money, but it was a whole lot tougher than it actually needed to be. Which is why I  
363 eventually left.

364 **[43:37] Payne Adler:** *Do you remember what the triggering incident was? Sorry to use that verb.*

365 **Takacs:** Where I made the decision to leave? Yeah. I had this one-two punch in the Spring of it  
366 would have been 2004. I left after the Spring of 2005 because I wanted to give a year’s notice. I didn’t want  
367 to just leave everyone high and dry. I made the decision Summer of 2004 that I was going to leave. I had  
368 this one-two punch. There were just a whole bunch of things that happened. But I had one incident where  
369 I had a meeting with my Department Chair who was not Bill Head, it was not my Founding Department  
370 Chair, I loved Bill, I met with my Department Chair and my Dean. I had found out that I was the lowest  
371 paid faculty member in my Department. I don’t even remember how I found that out. So I met with my  
372 Department Chair and my Dean. And my Department Chair said the reason I got such great student  
373 evaluations was because I knew [could identify] their students’ writing and they were afraid to say anything  
374 mean about me. [pause] And that was, to me, an epitomization of the dysfunction of CSUMB. And then I  
375 had these four capstone students that Spring, that had done wonderful, wonderful social justice-based  
376 science work. And if you are going to do social justice-based work there will be political positions or value  
377 positions that come out. And at a capstone festival they [students] did these dream presentations that many

378 of my colleagues didn't like because they were kind of explicitly political. And it was this crystallization of  
379 the vision that I had for this program, it just was never going to work. And if you situate that in the  
380 dysfunction of the broader University, I had this epiphany that over the long run I didn't see a future for  
381 myself there and I had to get out and do something else. And so that was that. Yeah.

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

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

390 **Payne Adler:** *Wow.*

391 **[47:22] Takacs:** I've never had any career objectives. You know, there are people in the world who, they  
392 want to do this and then they want to advance to that. I never had any of that. I would happily have stayed  
393 at Cal State Monterey Bay the rest of my professional life if I had felt happy and nurtured there. But I  
394 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  
395 better. It was that I just was pretty miserable in my professional life at CSUMB, so I just felt I had to get  
396 out of there for my own health.

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

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

402           **Payne Adler:** *Yes.*

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

405           **Payne Adler:** *I don't know.*

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

414           **Payne Adler:** *Key positions meaning...?*

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

420 **[50:46]** Whereas at CSUMB I just had this feeling that there was just a lot of really poor hires. So the  
421 combination of . . . the rush to open the doors to students before anything was in place combined with some  
422 really poor choices on collaborators, coupled with the fact that -- this is nothing that you can do here -- but  
423 coupled with the fact that California simply doesn't invest in education, not only our K-12 but our  
424 undergraduate and ugraduate programs are terribly underfunded compared to where they were, for  
425 example, in the 1970's. So it was always going to be a struggle because you have students who come to us

426 without the skills that you might want of college students. And they needed more resources, not less  
427 resources, in order to succeed, and they wanted to succeed. It wasn't that they weren't hardworking and  
428 ambitious. But we were under-funded and so that was always going to create both a competition for  
429 resources even among departments and faculty at CSUMB. But also if you wanted to help your students  
430 succeed as they wanted to succeed it would take an awful lot of your time and heart and effort. So that was  
431 part of the dysfunction as well. So I would go back to the 70's and change the results of Prop 13 and  
432 school funding.

433 **[52:21] Payne Adler:** *[Laughs] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you*  
434 *would like to add to this?*

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

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

446 **Takacs:** Yeah, I'm in touch with some of my students. They've gone on to, they do watershed  
447 restoration working in communities of color or local park development working in communities of color.  
448 Or they've gone on to law school and become environmental lawyers. Or all of the teachers that we  
449 graduated who came through with a sense of a social justice mission that they couple with their education.

450 And whether they are high school teachers or kindergarten teachers. One of the things that happened at  
451 CSUMB is Bill Head, the [founding ESSP] Chair, made it part of his mission to get underrepresented  
452 students Ph.D. scholarships and fellowships.

453 **Payne Adler:** *Ah.*

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

460 **Payne Adler:** *Right.*

461 **[55:37] Takacs:** I also taught the core science Gen Ed requirement for non majors. So I worked with non  
462 majors and helped to do some kind of science and environmental literacy for students that were going on to  
463 do whatever they were doing, whether it was becoming a creative writer or whatever. There are students  
464 who through this interdisciplinary social justice-infused curriculum, got a kind of education that they  
465 otherwise might not have gotten.

466 **Payne Adler:** *Um hmm.*

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

470 **Payne Adler:** *Well, I want to thank you so much for doing this, David and being a part of our Oral  
471 History Project.*

