DiFranco, Roland Oral History Interview

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Roland di Franco
Associate Professor and Professor in Mathematics, 1972 to 2001

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By Gwenn Browne

Transcribed by Erin Hendrickson, University Archives

Browne: --di Franco, by Gwen Browne made on May 1, 2007 in the UOP library.

di Franco: I think we’re there.

Browne: Yes. We are supposed to start with the question that says—what years did you serve at the university and what were your official titles?

di Franco: --I started from 1972 to 2001. I was an associate professor in mathematics from 72’ to 78’ and a professor from 78’ to 2001, chair of the mathematics department from 1975 to 1978 and chair of the Academic Council in 1988-89.

Browne: Okay. What circumstances brought you to Pacific?

di Franco: I was in my sixth year of teaching at Swarthmore College and I was told at that point I wasn’t going to get tenure, so I began the job hunt at a time when jobs were pretty hard to come by. I came up with three options; one was chair of the mathematics department at Temple Buell College in Denver, Colorado—formerly Colorado Women’s College, another was associate professor at a college called Richard Stockton State College in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and then associate professor here at the University of the Pacific. I chose Pacific from those three options in part because of the character of the math department and in part because of my conversations with Cliff Hand and—what I considered to be exciting opportunities of the I & I program as well as the location in California.

Browne: Okay, well what were your first impressions of the city and the people of Stockton?

di Franco: Uh, well I grew up in New York, so I think the first thing I appreciated was the ethnic mix of the city of Stockton. I have to say I missed the artistic opportunities—I found a limited artistic scene in Stockton, and a lack of museums. On the other hand I found the neighborhoods south of campus where we live very friendly, and rich, with greenness, and gardens—lots of trees. A real sort of a garden as cities go.

Browne: Okay. And what were your first impressions of Pacific?

di Franco: Well the main campus was quite beautiful. On the other hand the math department was in one of the Quonset huts as were several other COP departments. Some of the offices were windowless and cramped and not exactly a great working environment. Cliff Hand was Associate Dean of the College of the Pacific and he was
very intellectually stimulating. When Cliff became Dean, Bob Anderson from Physics became Associate Dean and in charge of I & I and he and I began a fruitful collaboration. We taught an I & I course called the Arts of Discovery and Invention. I think we argued the whole semester and enjoyed it. The students—about fifty of them—engaged in the arguments. It was really good learning. [Pause] I want to say one other thing. I was given the opportunity, the responsibility, of providing the mathematics program to the Engineering School and so I began to develop courses in differential equations for them. Dave Fletcher was one of my contacts in Engineering. It was a new field for me. I had previously studied algebra and logic and I had to learn a whole new field when I came here. I also had the impression that the faculty here were open to many new ideas and were really first rate teachers. Not afraid to do experimentation.

Browne: Good. You already mentioned a number of people, but are there others that you want to add that were especially helpful in your introduction to Pacific?

di Franco: Yeah. Besides Cliff Hand, Bob Anderson, and Dave Fletcher, Bill Browne in the math department was extremely supportive and actually Tom Ambrogi who was in religious studies was an old friend. In fact he told me about the position here at Pacific. I arrived on campus in June and Bill Binkley, the Dean of the College of the Pacific had just been fired. The faculty was in an uproar and there were open meetings in Anderson Hall about the situation and I quickly got to know the Banister Mafia. I was glad to come to a university where there was such an outspoken faculty.

Browne: Good. Now we move into the curriculum. What is your impression of the changes in the curriculum of Pacific from your initial introduction to your present day?

di Franco: Well I personally thought the I & I program was creative and faculty taught in their areas of expertise. I think that one of the errors was forcing people to never repeat a course. If courses could have been repeated I think we would have had a rich curriculum. I’ve always had misgivings about the current general educational program because faculty are asked to teach outside their areas of training. I have never taught in the new program and I’ve known quite a number of faculty who have taught in it once and don’t wish to repeat it. The mathematics major at that point was somewhat weak and has been strengthened over the years. The service component of the math program has always been an important part of it and we have developed good collaboration with faculty in School of Engineering and School of Business and we’ve since then added faculty to deal with the specialties that are needed for those subject areas and I think that the program has grown and been more adaptive to the needs of its service requirements and also that the major has blossomed. We—Bob Anderson and I, had constructed the Applied Mathematics-Physics program. I will admit that it bit the bullet with the trimming of academic programs shortly after the President DeRosa arrived.

Browne: Okay. The next question is about courses and programs which you have addressed. Can you add to that or can you talk about what activities you have especially enjoyed participating in?
di Franco: Well, certainly Differential Equations is a course that I taught in conjunction with the physics faculty. I would invite Physics and Engineering Faculty in to give lectures so that students could see the connections between the mathematics and the applications in which they were going to be using differential equations. It’s now a required course for all of them. I also developed two additional courses in advanced ordinary differential equations and partial differential equations. Then, Bill Ford who came here shortly after, a couple of years after I arrived, taught numerical analysis. But he decided to switch to Computer Science and I took on the chores then in teaching Numerical Analysis. Again that was of great interest to the School of Engineering students.

When I first came I taught Statistics to about ninety students per class in my first two years at Pacific. And with the help of the Dean’s office—again Cliff Hand was involved, we bought desk calculators. I started the Statistics Lab, in which was then an “L-shaped” room in the Geology Quonset right next to Roger Barnett’s Lab. These were meager beginnings but when we finally moved over the Classroom Building we transformed it into a real computer laboratory. One other thing—one day I was lecturing in Statistics and I was teaching probability. I was going through the simple business of adding fractions like 2/9’s plus 4/9’s equals 6/9’s or 2/3’s and one of the students blurted out “where did you get that?” I then realized the need for some kind of proficiency test for Statistics anyway. I brought this to the attention of the math department and others such as Dean Christianson took up the challenge and created the current math proficiency test.

Another area that I have really enjoyed is Computer Visualization. My responsibility in the math curriculum was Multi-Variable Calculus, which has a lot of 2-D and 3-D dimensional stuff in it. I realized the students were having trouble visualizing it, so I first began by building physical models of different surfaces and objects that we were studying. Then finally when we had a Computer Lab, I recommended the purchase of software for the lab that would demonstrate 3-D objects. We first used MathLib from Harvey Mudd College and then some other products. That was the beginning of the computer graphics revolution in mathematics anyway. Then I used labs in Multi-Dimensional Calculus. Then my last faculty development leave was in the year 1999. I did a mathematics clinic with a group of five students to develop modules for visualizing concepts in Multi-Dimensional Calculus. This was a teaching-learning format that I learned on a year of teaching at Harvey Mudd College. I think that’s it on curriculum.

Browne: Okay. Who are the individuals at Pacific that have most admired and why?

di Franco: Wow. Let’s start with Cliff Hand a thoughtful educator who I think was probably a better Dean then Academic Vice-President.

Browne: He was a better teacher than he was a Dean.

di Franco: [laughs] Could be. Bob Anderson who was always thinking about how to solve university problems, Sid Turoff who taught me and countless other faculty how to be leaders, Rosie Hannon who always reminded us of the “AAUP-policies” and was
unafraid to speak out, Marty Gibson who always had students at heart and who understood how organizations could improve—he and I wrote the plan for the last presidential search together, mostly Martin’s ideas and my politicking, Gene Pearson who know governance in every respect, respects the faculty, and is unafraid to tell the faculty what he thinks. Then President Don DeRosa who understands the potential of Pacific and seems to be realizing it, Bob Monagan, who I think saved Pacific at a crucial juncture and lots of other colleagues I call friends.

Browne: Good. From your initial introduction to Pacific to the present day, what changes do you see between the students, faculty, administrators, and staff?

di Franco: Well, on the students I think I see an improvement in the preparation the students have for college work and I see a greater diversity. Certainly, the number of women coming to the university has increased. I note that a large number of students are first generation to go to college and I am a kindred spirit to them. I have always enjoyed teaching them and advising them as to how to adjust to college life, especially when their families didn’t quite know how to support them.

On the faculty, I think that the young faculty today faces the challenge of promotion and tenure and the teacher-scholar model. I sense the model has been defined narrowly and the integration of teaching and scholarship is not well thought out. For example, undergraduate research seems to not count on many of these decisions. I don’t think scholarships should be divorced from teaching, otherwise teaching would suffer. [pause]—I also see faculty not involved in the governance process. I think this flees in the face in the true meaning of the university as a community that teaches and learns. So I am worried about that.

The administrators are a mixed bag. The president is engaged in fundraising and building a Board of Regents. I give him high marks for that, but I fear he is losing contact with the faculty. The Provost is one hard-working guy; he needs to be more in contact with faculty and sometimes I think he is using the State College model for Pacific; more top-down administration that I am comfortable with. The Vice-President of Finance is one of the best appointments the president has made. He is a great problem solver and brings the thinking of modern finance to the university finances. The recent Vice-President for Development is a masterful appointment. He has already rethought development and leads in a new direction.

As far as the staff, I have the impression that many of them are more highly trained. They seem to enjoy the friendliness of Pacific and I wonder if they feel that Pacific is in their court, whether the university really supports them.

Browne: Now we have had at least a couple of moves toward collective bargaining so—

di Franco: Yes, yes.
Browne: --I don’t think they feel that way. Anyway, how do you feel—I think again you have gotten some of this across, but there is a specific question of about how do you feel about the administration.

di Franco: Well, I give them high marks for financial integrity; the faculty salary plan is certainly impressive. Enrollment is an area of great success and hopefully continues to improve. Fundraising is a marked improvement over previous decades and the drive for academic quality is also clear. But I wonder if the Pacific Family is still alive. There is a tendency for top-down decision making. The emphasis on the scholar part of the teacher-scholar model is pursued to excess and is having a deleterious effect on faculty morale and faculty participation.

Browne: Okay. What programs have you been involved in or have had an interest in which you feel are particularly significant?

di Franco: Well, let’s see. I will start with the math department. I think that I have nurtured the development of Applied Mathematics in the department and improved the service to Engineering and Physics and enriched the math major. Several new courses are in the new curriculum because of my own initiatives.

I chaired the Academic Council By-Laws Committee for three years and the by-laws were approved by the faculty, the president, and the regents. And they established the principals for governance at the university. Then a third item is the university handbook committee. I began this adventure as a member of the special professional relations committee from 91’ to 95’. We wrote a document that revised the academic policies relating to students and faculty. The president actually seems to be offended by this committee’s work. In 95’ he formed the university committee to rewrite the university handbook and shortly after left the university. In 96’ President DeRosa reformulated the committee and I was appointed to the committee. Dean Gerald Caplan chaired the committee and the first two years we worked primarily on the university policy on governance and this was finally approved by the faculty, president and the regents. The work of the committee was extremely slow because of the significant lack of leadership. Towards the end of the second year, I suggested we scope out the rest of the handbook and distribute the work to the committee. And then Herb Reinelt added his voice to that chorus. In 98’ DeRosa appointed me to be the chair and modified the committee membership. So from September 1998 to April 2001 we worked assiduously meeting every two weeks we picked up the pace and some draft revisions flew through the committee. The university hired a lawyer, Mark Vartain, to assist in important personnel matters. We would meet in the Provost office with the Provost and Mike to hammer out policies. I give lots of credit to John Sims from the Law School who is very skilled in turning Mike’s legal language into readable text. The work was indeed quite intense. Compromises were hammered out, sections of the handbook, which were not the province of the faculty, were written by appropriate administrators, and I functioned as an editor for the whole handbook. In April of 2001 I took disability leave to go to Swedish Cancer Center in Seattle for treatment for metastasized cancer to my lungs. Jim Blankenship took over the chair and within a year the handbook was finished, necessary
approvals from all parties had been obtained. The Academic Council gave me the
dubious honor of a dedication at the front of the handbook.

Another area is presidential searches. In 1985 I was elected by the Council to serve on
the presidential search committee. Gordon Schaber chaired the committee. We did find
candidates who would have made excellent presidents. Dr. James Appleton, who later
became the president of Redlands was among them and was the faculty favorite. The
future president of Harvey Mudd College was also among candidates. The regents had
other ideas and appointed Dr. Bill Ashley and I think I will let history judge the wisdom
of that appointment.

In 1993 the university began to search for another president. I served on the committee to
prepare for the presidential search, chaired by Bob Monagan. Prior to the first meeting,
Martin Gibson and I developed a plan for the search based on the principals of
Organizational Psychology, which was Martin’s specialty. I carried it to the first meeting
and distributed it to the committee. We upstaged the whole process by presenting a very
well thought out search procedure. Others were just beginning to think about the process,
but we had a complete plan ready to go. And after some tinkering, the plan was accepted
and taken to the Regents where it was approved. The plan embodied a principal Bob
Monagan put forth and that is that the major constituencies who should conduct the
process and be satisfied with the outcomes of selection of the president are the Regents
and the Faculty. And I then went on to serve on the presidential search committee. Bob
Monagan chaired the committee. He is a great consensus builder. We would discuss an
issue until we had an agreement and then he would say “well hearing no objection we’ll
decide x,y,z”. The first time I heard this I cringed because I was used to taking votes, but
as the process went forward we built consensus on a wide array of decisions and the
result was that there was two candidates who had the unanimous support of the
committee. Herb Reinelt and I were dispatched to their home campuses to be sure of the
leadership qualifications. We came back with the good news that they were both
qualified. The Regents chose President Donald DeRosa and that has been one of the
most crucial decisions in the life of the university.

Finally, academic computing: in my second year of the university I served on one of the
first committees to deal with academic computing. The committee was convened to
decide the location of a machine called the RJE, the “remote job entry” machine. This is
a machine the reads IBM cards. The one that is in the Engineering building. Since then I
have worked on to improve academic computing so that it meets the needs of the faculty.
I helped designed the first statistic lab in the Quonset hut. As chair of the math
department I supervised facility development of the classroom building for the move of
mathematics to that building including a new mathematics computer lab. I have served
on countless university computing committees trying to improve academic computing.
My own professional development has involved the use of computer visualization in
numerous mathematical courses and the study of computer graphics. In 1995, we
brought the Maple Co-Math 95’ conference to the university and Delta College. I think
that the visualization is a key to helping students learn mathematics.
Browne: We move into another section and while you have given us some—a doomed president, in history’s decision. Our next question is what is your personal opinion on the administration past and present?

di Franco: Well I think under the McCaffrey administration the university lacked good financial management and good university development programs. I think it was the regents that allowed the state of the university to deteriorate. I think that the report that Joseph Subbiando wrote for WASC was a correct description of the university’s condition and the criticisms that WASC made were a wakeup call. I think that under the leadership under Bob Monagan the regents began to change. The choice of DeRosa was the beginning of change for the university. We are now in a better financial state; development is headed in the right direction. The external view of the university has changed markedly and we are beginning to achieve our potential. I believe that the provost—while doing many good things—is losing faculty support. Part of the reason is not providing resources for professional development, yet at the same time demanding greater scholarship from the faculty. He needs to listen more to the faculty and not be so sure he knows what’s best for the university.

Browne: How did controversies between faculty, deans, and administration affect your department and its growth?

di Franco: The mathematics department has suffered from the appointment of too many adjunct faculty. At times, forty percent of courses have been taught by non-tenured faculty. This is a limitation on quality which has surfaced in every program review. It is still happening and weakens the mathematics program.

Browne: Okay. How would you describe the campus during the turbulent time? Such as the sixties and seventies. What do you remember of the students and their activities during these years?

di Franco: Well I came to Pacific in 72’ so I can’t speak about the sixties. I did come from a Quaker college, Swarthmore College, where anti-war activities were at a high pitch. But I found very little anti-war activity at Pacific. I heard that there was an anti-war demonstration in which students and faculty surrounded Burns tower, but I didn’t see it. In the seventies I served on the CIP Advisory Board. There I saw great anger over the number of minority students admitted to the program. Board meetings were often the scene of strong rhetoric from community leaders. A great struggle broke out over the qualifications of students admitted to the program. Over time the program has strengthened but not without much turmoil.

Browne: Okay. What issues were you involved in which stand out in your mind as important to the growth and development of Pacific?

di Franco: In the last years of the McCaffrey administration I served on the Academic Council when the council tried to bring about a change of leadership in the university. We voted to conduct an evaluation of the president by means of a survey of the faculty.
This angered the president and the regents who retaliated by extending President McCaffrey’s term of office. President Atchley was appointed. He was unable to meet faculty concerns about the state of the university. I was the second Academic Chair under President Atchley, following Dale McNeil. Tensions continued through those years; cuts in retirement, benefits, financial insecurity, lagging in admissions. At one university convocation, I supported Dale when he led a walkout of the faculty from the convocation. These conditions led me to want to make the next presidential search a success. My efforts to achieve this were described earlier about the appointment of President DeRosa. I lent my efforts to helping improve the faculty governance of the university and I described those efforts earlier.

Browne: Okay. [Pause] What is your impression of changes that have occurred since you left?

di Franco: Well, I retired in 2001. I am impressed by the improvement of faculty salaries, faculty benefits, especially retirement contributions of the university. The more effective management of finances has been impressive. The efforts of development to have better connections with alumni are also impressive. I think the definition of teacher-scholar model is a danger to the quality of teaching and faculty morale. The standards are being defined in favor or scholarship but without sufficient support for scholarship. Improvement in the quality of students is impressive.

Browne: Okay. What are you involved in currently at Pacific? Which holds your greatest interest?

di Franco: I represent the Emeriti on the Academic Council and also serve on the Executive Board of the University Emeriti Society.

Browne: Okay. What contribution do you feel Pacific has made to the Stockton community?

di Franco: The University is one of the largest employers in the city. The university adds to the cultural level of the region through its programs, concerts, performances, and presentations. The students and faculty are active in community issues and—I think that’s it.

Browne: Okay. What community activities have you been involved in?

di Franco: I served on the CIP Advisory Board for many years. I served on numerous of Parent Advisory organizations when my children were in Stockton Unified Schools. I served on an SUSD district wide community which examined the transition of students from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school and our family is a constant supporter of St. Mary’s Dining Hall.

Browne: Good. What did you see about being special about Pacific in the past and what hopes to you have for the campus development for the future?
di Franco: First, I see Pacific as a genuine community. Faculty, administration, staff, and students all work together to care about each other and seek to help one another. I see Pacific as a place where issues can be explored freely and where civility is respected and supported. I see Pacific as a place where we teach students to think and be leaders. I see Pacific as a community where first generations go-to-college students can be nurtured and supported in their growth. I hope that Pacific will preserve these values, enabling faculty to achieve these goals. That is one of the main reasons for the existence of administrators.

Browne: Okay we have reached the end of the script but I would like to ask you if you’ve got anything you would like to add. What would you like the history to record about this discussion we have had?

di Franco: Well, I think that the faculty have been most influential in bringing the university to achieve its true potential. I think it was the many faculty battles in which we fought for equality at the university that are beginning to come to flourish. I think that Bob Monagan was right—it’s the Regents and the Faculty that make the university and I just hope that continues in the future.

Browne: Okay. Thank you.

di Franco: You’re welcome.

[Tape stops; end of interview]