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Oral History Interview of Myra Lerman (SOH-005)

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Oral History Interview of Myra Lerman

Interview Date: March 6, 2007

Interviewed by: Gregory Fidler, Suffolk University Student from History 364: Oral History.

Citation: Lerman, Myra. Interviewed by Gregory Fidler. Suffolk University Oral History Project, SOH-005. 3 March 2007. Transcript and audio available. Suffolk University Archives, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

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Interview Summary

In this interview, Myra Lerman, assistant dean of undergraduate programs at Suffolk University's Sawyer Business School, reflects on her career at Suffolk, which began in 1982. She discusses her educational and career background; the positions she has held at Suffolk; the positive relationships she has with Suffolk students; her commitment to the university; the attributes that make Suffolk special; and what she sees in Suffolk's future. She concludes by reiterating her love of Suffolk University and its students.



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Subject Headings

Lerman, Myra

Suffolk University

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This interview took place on March 6, 2007, at Suffolk University Law School's
John Joseph Moakley Law Library.

Interview Transcript

GREG FIDLER: Today is Tuesday, March 6, 2007, and we are sitting here with Myra Lerman. How are you doing today?

MYRA LERMAN: Hello. I'm doing fine, thank you. A little freezing out there. (laughs)

FIDLER: It's a cold day today in Boston. Today we're just going to be talking about Myra's experience at Suffolk, her position, and her history with the school, and the school's history in general. So, we just want to start with little background questions. When and where did you grow up?

LERMAN: I grew up in the Bronx, New York, and the family moved to Queens, New York, when I was about fifteen. I went to school at Queens College, which was not very far from my house. I went to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and Columbia University in New York. I did various summer programs at the University of Michigan and UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles].

FIDLER: Okay. Did you live in the Bronx or Queens longer?

LERMAN: Let's see; the Bronx longer.

FIDLER: How was that different than living in Boston today?

LERMAN: Boston is beautiful. Even when I moved here—now, of course, it's more beautiful. It was a much more beautiful city. In fact, I moved here because there were so many parks and I had a baby and I figured what a wonderful place to grow up. Because when I grew up in the Bronx, we played in the empty lots and in the cellars and on the roofs. The closest park I think

must have been the Bronx Zoo and you had to drive there. (both laugh) And Boston is so much more an international city. New York City is too, but not so much the Bronx. The Bronx is very diverse, but little pockets here and there; certainly not the international feel you get in Boston.

FIDLER: When growing up, what were some of your dreams and ambitions as a child or a young person?

LERMAN: Well I dreamt about being an astronaut (both laugh). I dreamt about—because I read a lot of science fiction and sometimes I even had dreams that I was flying in between the planets. (laughs) It's amazing that I had those kinds of dreams. I loved to read. I was that kind of kid. I was very sociable too, but I would empty out whole libraries of their science fiction collection, so my dreams were quite colorful and unrealistic (both laugh), just like my ambition to be an astronaut.

FIDLER: Do you have a favorite book?

LERMAN: A favorite book?

FIDLER: Back then or even today?

LERMAN: Okay, let's see. What have I read lately that I've loved? It's hard to just pin down one. I liked—I wouldn't say this is my favorite of all time, but I liked *Anil's Ghost*, it's A-N-I-L-H-apostrophe-S Ghost, and it's by the same fellow who wrote *The English Patient* [Michael Ondaatje], and naturally, I can't think of his name right now. And when I was little, it must have been fairy tales and fantasy and science fiction. I read Dostoevsky too, I would just go through whole libraries not only of the science fiction collection, but of classics, so I just loved to read, and that's why I became an English major in college.

FIDLER: That answers my next question of, how did they influence your life? (both laugh) Obviously they had a very big effect on your life. You already talked a little bit about your past

education, but is there any bit of it that you would like to point out that affected you the most, or what was maybe your favorite place to be educated?

LERMAN: All right. I certainly loved what I was studying at the University of Pennsylvania, that was language and linguistics and that's where I found my passion of the Greek Bronze Age, Bronze Age, Greece. I was studying Linear B, which was a script that had been deciphered in this century, maybe in the fifties, and it turned out to be an archaic form of Greek, perhaps seven hundred years older than Homeric Greek. It was very exciting to me, so I did some research on that, and to this day I love historical linguistics, language and linguistics, and I think that's why I love science also. I like to study the origins of things, the origins of the universe, cosmology, the origins of languages, the origins of cultures and civilizations, like archaeology. These are the things I've had passions for all my life, and I continue to read in this area as well as novels and other things that I continue to read.

FIDLER: Um, got a little lost here.

LERMAN: That's okay, that's all right, it's the first time you're using it.

FIDLER: Do you have any family that has influenced your life in any way? Is there any person in your family that has had a great impact?

LERMAN: Yes. They've all been voracious readers and they've been artists, so I have as—in addition to being very literary—having a great interest in literature and the sciences, which my father and mother and sister and daughter, everyone shares the passion for science also. My mother, my sister, my daughter, and my sister's daughter are all artists to one degree or another. My sister teaches art and she also sells her own works which have been exhibited. My niece has been a curator in museums and she also sells her work. They're very—my daughter got a degree here at NESAD [New England School of Art and Design at Suffolk University] in fine arts.

FIDLER: Oh, really?

LERMAN: Yes. I don't have too much artistic talent, but a great appreciation—love museums. My father's a great influence on that, too. When we were little, his idea of a family outing was to go to one of the big museums in New York, so I have a great love of museums and art and theater.

FIDLER: Any particular museum that really stood out?

LERMAN: I love the Museum of Natural History. I just was so excited about that.

FIDLER: It's a very good museum, I've been there. Coming out of school, what was your first job? And do you remember it very well? What stood out about it?

LERMAN: I'd say the first real job other than babysitting and making a couple bucks here and there when you're a kid, my first job out of college—one of my English teachers recommended me to work at Random House and I was—for the summer before I went to graduate school, and I was what was called a run-on editor. And what that is, is they were working on the new Random House Dictionary, and we would look at word entries and make a list of run-ons to the word. So if the word is bicycle, a run-on could be bicyclist or bicycling, or things like that. (laughs) And it's funny, we looked at other dictionaries to get ideas; that was the field. I was so surprised (both laugh), but I guess you would do that today on the internet, so that's what we did.

I love word origins and everything about language and language development and connections between languages. So that was a very fun job for me even though to someone else, it could be the most boring thing in the world, but there we were in a room filled with books looking up run-ons to words in a dictionary, and the small print didn't bother me then like it does now. (both laugh)

FIDLER: Did your first job affect the current job you have now? Has it had a great influence on it? Do you think it helped you build to where you are now?

LERMAN: Well you know, I think so. I have a lot of patience and I am very good at detail work (both laugh) as you can imagine. And I find that in my present position, working with students, it's wonderful to have a lot of patience, and with all of the administrative work, attention to detail is so important. So I think yeah, that I did learn some skills there that I hadn't learned in school, in college.

FIDLER: So you gained some experience.

LERMAN: Yes, yes.

FIDLER: That brings me to my next question. What is your current connection and position at Suffolk University?

LERMAN: Since 2001, I have been assistant dean for undergraduate programs in the Sawyer Business School.

FIDLER: What does that mean?

LERMAN: I'm responsible for the undergraduate programs office and we have a staff of [counts quietly] seven right now. And right under me, or working alongside of me is Director Lauren Mahoney, who is the office manager, as well as the administrator who works with me on many projects. Some of the things our office is responsible for are academic advising, academic standing, orientation, retention, student development, honors programs, curriculum, course and degree requirements, anything to do really with the sixteen hundred undergraduate students that we have in the business school. And also I direct the honors programs; we have three honors programs.

FIDLER: What are the three?

LERMAN: In 1992 in the fall we created the Griffin Honor Society.¹ It was modeled somewhat on the Archers.² We didn't have an honors program in the business school. And that was in fall '92 and it started very modestly, perhaps less than twenty-five students and now I've asked the dean for another twelve, so perhaps we'll have 150 in the fall. That's the Griffin Honor Society. It's a very strong cohort with an excellent retention rate of ninety-five, say, to ninety-eight. The second honors program is very new, and then I'll mention one that's intermediate. The second one is the Undergraduate Business Honors Scholars Program, which we just started this past fall, fall '06. Based again, modeled on the College's [College of Arts and Sciences'] honors scholars program which began a year before. And everything we make suitable and to fit our needs so they're not exact replicas because they're meeting the needs of business students and our faculty. And so the GPA [Grade Point Average] is a little different and the requirements in the business school are different. Now that honors program started with thirteen students in the fall and right now we've gone through the cycle of selecting the new fall honors scholars, so we'll accept fifteen. We've got twice as many applications as last year, and again from all over the world and different states. It's very exciting.

FIDLER: So they're constantly growing.

LERMAN: Yeah, oh absolutely. It's a joy to work with these groups but it's a joy for me to work at Suffolk, and I'll tell you a little more about that.

The other honors program started in 2001; that's the Sawyer Ambassadors, similar perhaps to some other ambassador programs in the university, or Trustee Ambassadors or Orientation Scholars. These ten students work out of our office for ten hours a week and their mission is to build community among business students and address unmet student needs. So they've revitalized all the student clubs and they just plan the events, and they're just—I couldn't live without them. (both laugh) They're wonderful, wonderful students and eight of them are

¹ The Griffin Honor Society is an honors program in Suffolk University's Sawyer Business School. It is named after John Griffin, who played a significant role in the development of Suffolk's undergraduate colleges in the 1930s and was a member of Suffolk University's board of trustees.

² The Archer Fellows Program is an honors program in Suffolk's College of Arts and Sciences. It is named after Gleason L. Archer, the university's founder.

graduating. It's very hard. So we need eight more next year. They're such a—they were the best group.

FIDLER: What is it like when students you work with move on? Is it a hard thing?

LERMAN: (laughs) I'll tell you, my mother says I always—I guess, I don't know why you complain to your mom—I say, “Oh Mom, I'm going to miss Lenka. What am I going to do without Geronimo? And Julia's graduating, and Rob.” She says, “Myra, you say that every year and then the next group comes in and then you say it about them.” So I forget that every year has its wonderful students that become your favorites and they're sort of all your favorites and make it a joy to work here altogether.

FIDLER: How long have you been with Suffolk and what were some of the first positions you had here?

LERMAN: Okay, I've been here, let's see, since December '82 to December '02, that would be ten and here we are in '07, well I guess in December '07 it could be fifteen—twenty-five years. Well, twenty-three or four (both laugh); they don't count it until you've passed the twenty-fifth year.

FIDLER: Really? What were some of your first positions here?

LERMAN: Oh yes, so the first position I had I actually found through the newspaper. It was called competency based education coordinator. What a peculiar title. (Fidler laughs) I knew what it meant because I had been doing work with student competencies and matrices at Wheelock College, and assessment and evaluating curriculum and evaluating student learning. So when I applied I knew what that meant and nobody else really did. It was a Title III³ position.

³ Title III, Part A is a program of the U.S. Department of Education's Institutional Development and Undergraduate Education Service Office. The program “helps eligible IHEs [institutions of higher education] to become self-sufficient and expand their capacity to serve low-income students by providing funds to improve and strengthen the academic quality, institutional management, and fiscal stability of eligible institutions.” (See <http://www.ed.gov/programs/iduestitle3a/index.html>)

Certainly Dean McDowell⁴ and Dean Ronayne⁵—you might have worked with Mike Ronayne—it was part of the Title III project; and he had some people working on Title III, and so did we. We started an international major through that Title III grant, and we started my position of looking at students to see if they were taking their courses in the appropriate sequence and sometimes I found that freshmen were taking senior level courses, and of course they got an F in them. So we instituted as a result of some of that work we were doing a prerequisite and leveling control system with the registrar's office so that a student couldn't do that because the registrar's system would stop them. And if it was a senior or junior class, a freshman or sophomore couldn't take it, and if they didn't have the prerequisites, they couldn't take the course. So that ensured that students had the foundation to be successful in the course that they were in.

And also, Dean McDowell, the first dean I worked with—I've worked with three—his mission was to get our business school accredited by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB] International, which was the most important and prestigious accrediting agency for business schools. So that was part of that job to work on a lot of projects that would get our school and curriculum in shape.

FIDLER: And has the school reached its goal?

LERMAN: Oh, yes. Let me think if it happened during McDowell's tenure. Let's see, he stayed until '91. Yes! Lucky him. That he accomplished that before he left for a deanship in California, because in 1989, I believe, we were accredited. Yes, it was 1989. And the AACSB accrediting association has only accredited one third of business schools in the country, and there are over three thousand business schools, and we were the first I think in Massachusetts or the Northeast region—I'll get this straight; the first in Massachusetts to be accredited for both business undergrad and business master's, so we were quite proud of that.

FIDLER: So it was quite an honor?

⁴ Richard L. McDowell was dean of the Sawyer Business School from 1974 to 1991.

⁵ Michael R. Ronayne, Jr. (1937-2005), was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1972 to 2004.

LERMAN: Yeah, it was quite an honor. We had a big party to celebrate it, because it's always a lot of work, a lot of work.

FIDLER: I can only imagine. (both laugh)

LERMAN: The report was this [gestures] fat, and two books of self study report were very huge, but yeah, it was very well worth it.

FIDLER: After that, what did you do before becoming dean of—

LERMAN: Okay, well, we realized that nobody understood the competency based education coordinator title and it was so cumbersome to say. What I was doing was a lot of advising, and actually at that point I was doing advising, academic standing, course and degree requirements, the orientation, and so my title was changed to director of advising and assessment. We kept the “assessment” in there, but what with all the other things that we were doing, even though we tried to do some projects in courses, like look at student skills, pre- and post- the course or pre- and post-program, it just fell by the way[side] at that point because we were so busy with student advising and academic standing and orienting new students and trying to retain students and have programs, and I was working with undergrad and graduate students also. Not just undergraduate students at that time. In those positions I worked a lot with graduate students, advising graduate students, doing all the petitions for graduate students, the orientations.

FIDLER: Do you still keep in contact with any of your old students? Do any of them still come back and visit?

LERMAN: Oh, yes. I keep in contact by email, and of course some do come back and visit. After the director of advising and assessment, the next position was—is this part of your question?

FIDLER: Yes.

LERMAN: The next position was the director of undergraduate programs, and that was in '91 and in '92, we started one of the honors programs. Those are the students who keep in touch with me the most, however, I just recently, at a Suffolk event, saw a student who graduated I think in—I think it was '89 and she was going to law school at that point and I didn't know if she dropped out or anything but when she met me, she said, "Oh, I'm coming back to law school to finish my degree," and it was just very wonderful to see her. A lot of students come back for recommendations, or they keep in touch with you to talk about what jobs they're holding now or they want to be involved on some committee that you're working on or with other alum groups. But the most students who keep in touch are the honors students who I've spent the most time with, I think, since the honors programs came into the Sawyer—into the business school. Of course before the honors programs I worked a lot with the academic standing students and I sometimes see those students as well, and I'm so glad that some of them graduated, or I'd say maybe most of them. (both laugh) And then in 2001, I became assistant dean.

FIDLER: What are some of your best and worst memories at Suffolk? (laughs) Tricky question.

LERMAN: No, no, this is wonderful. Well a best memory, of course, would be becoming assistant dean when I was doing the work of assistant dean all those years, so that was a wonderful recognition for me and appreciation of me. Some of the best memories with students are a student like Lenka Benova [BSBA '02], who worked with me and I couldn't imagine her graduating because she was just—made herself so valuable in our office and she graduated with a management degree and went to work in a health networking organization and then decided she'd like to go to law school. But she deferred law school to work in Nigeria as the financial controller of Doctors Without Borders. She took that position for a year. And then she decided that she'd like to work with countries in conflict and learn more about the Middle Eastern peoples and cultures. So she went—after the year in Nigeria, she went to the American University of Cairo and she's studying for the masters in Middle Eastern studies, taking Arabic. She's worked for the United Nations on displaced persons. She asked us if she could help us out at our Dakar campus in Senegal one summer. We said of course, that you could help the students

there in the competitions; you could coach the competitions and help Professor Pierre Du Jardin,⁶ who coaches competitions today, and remind me to tell you a little more about the competitions.

So we helped her get there by paying her airfare and she could live in our res. hall there in Dakar. And she coached the students in Senegal so that they won first place for the whole country of Senegal in a competition called SIFE, Students in Free Enterprise. And what that competition is all about is about helping people who are in a distressful economic situation to find solutions to pull themselves out and be able to make a living or manage their life or budget or their children or to have some plans for children for college or whatever. So those are the kinds of cases that you study in a SIFE case competition. And they went—that team went to the nationals in Paris; that was very exciting. Our Dakar team went and I think they placed in one of the first days of the competition.

But Lenka is someone who gives back. She's always in touch, sends pictures of herself in Nigeria. She sent a journal. The whole year she was there. Whenever she got a chance she'd come back and have lunch with me and Professor Du Jardin or Professor Sergenian⁷ or other people who worked with her. And she herself did very well in the competitions that we have for business students. I'll tell you a little bit more about those. But there are—Lenka keeps in touch the most so I'm very close friends with her, but we have many students like that who give back, alums who give back. I'm thinking of John Leonetti [MSF '01, JDF '01]. He won an award for being one of the best alums I think, or the most outstanding alum for the year for the whole university, and he's always in touch with me to send him interns if he has open positions. We have some wonderful alums of our programs and I'm just so thrilled that they contact us to tell us what they're doing and to contact us to see how they can be involved and help our current students, so that's very exciting—as coaches or to get them internships or to be in a classroom and give feedback to executive presentations. So there's so many ways our alums connect, it's just a great, great joy in my life.

FIDLER: That's actually very, very good to hear.

⁶ Pierre Du Jardin, DBA, is an associate professor of management and coordinates the Sawyer Business School's Interdisciplinary Programs.

⁷ Gail Sergenian, PhD, is an associate professor of accounting.

LERMAN: Isn't that wonderful?

FIDLER: It's good to hear those kind of stories.

LERMAN: I'm so lucky, I mean, we're so lucky.

FIDLER: What are some of the not-so-good moments?

LERMAN: Not-so-good. Well, one more good thing. As the years passed and I decided that I would stay at Suffolk—because you know in the beginning you think, Oh, I'll live here, I'll live there, and I'll get a better position and more money. But after about [counts quietly] almost ten years—after about seven or eight years then, all of a sudden I said, “But if I left, how could I leave Chris? How could I leave Lauren?” I was thinking of my colleagues that I love to work with. That's a great, great joy to like working with your colleagues. And our office in particular is very congenial, very collegial, and that's why students overrun our office all the time.

What was I saying? Oh, yes, so then I would feel like Suffolk was my home and sometimes by mistake in the last few years I'd say home when I meant Suffolk or I'd call my Suffolk number instead of calling my home number. And all of a sudden one day I said, “Thank God I work here. Thank God I'm going to work where I love my job and my colleagues and my students, most of them.” So that was just—so I hoped that my students and that our students would be happy. So that's one of the questions when we get together at a networking event or anything when I find out what they're doing and where they are and who they married and who their children are, I say, “So are you happy in your work?” Because I know it means so much to me. And I feel very lucky to look forward to every day to going to my job, and how many people can say that? And look how many years it's been. It's never been boring. It's changed all the time, constantly. It's changed with the things that I do, the people I work with, with the students. It's constantly interesting and exciting.

FIDLER: Well that is a very pleasant thought.

LERMAN: And rewarding. Enormously rewarding, when I see people like Lenka going out and giving back or John or so many students.

FIDLER: Well, I don't even want to ask the second part of that question anymore. (laughs)

LERMAN: Oh the negative?

FIDLER: (laughs) Yeah.

LERMAN: Oh, did I keep putting that off? Wait, I'll remember. (pause) During academic standing meetings, in the earlier years that I worked here, sometimes faculty in the graduate academic standing committee would be a little insensitive, I felt, to students. I know they were disappointed and they would say to themselves—the faculty would say this—How could a graduate student not maintain the standards?—it's a 3.0—and how could a graduate student not know the rules and regulations? So there were only a few—very few graduate students appear on academic standing. And I would be on the committee with them and here would be this—and I would set up the meetings and speak to the students and walk them in to be a support for them or an advocate for them as much as I could. They'd have to do the work themselves—I'm not going to get the B average for them—but they know someone's there supporting them and hoping that they will succeed. And I would sit there and a faculty member would say, "How could you get a B-minus in this course? That's not acceptable!" Or, you know, really come down hard on someone when they're already in a vulnerable position.

FIDLER: Being a little insensitive.

LERMAN: So I must say that I blew up, not in front of the students, but in front of the committee. And I got angry at them and told them what I thought of them and when I went back to my office I called up the dean and told him what I thought of them and he did remove some—two of them from the committee.

FIDLER: Wow.

LERMAN: I'm very glad. Perhaps they can make a contribution elsewhere, but not on the academic standing committee. (both laugh) So yeah, I was horrified that they could not realize that they were being unkind or thoughtless and unsupportive in an educational environment.

FIDLER: Big question here. What makes Suffolk different from other schools in Boston, the country, or ones that you attended personally?

LERMAN: Okay. (pause) It's smaller than any of the huge universities and even Queens College that I attended as an undergrad, so it's the smallest school—I mean, I worked at Wheelock College, but not that long and I was a teacher, and it was different when you're faculty rather than an administrator. So I like the size; the size is very comfortable. It's very comfortable for students and the students who come here, I think—and do extremely well—are looking for this size school where they can be who they are and not in a huge class of two hundred and they could be—interact with faculty much easier than if you're one of—someone's student of a faculty member who maybe has three hundred advisees or people in a huge lab. So I think the size is a big plus for the students, for faculty to get to know their colleagues, and it's probably easier for faculty in a school this size to do research across disciplines, I would think, than to stay in your own little ivory tower somewhere and never meet someone from another area because maybe your school is so huge that your area takes up a whole building instead of the way it is here, where now in 73 Tremont, where you can go to the sixth floor, there are faculty in the accounting department right next to faculty in management, things like that. And I think that it facilitates integrated research for faculty, so it's a plus for faculty as well, the size of the school.

What else makes Suffolk unique? Well, it enables people like myself and other administrators whom I know very well and who I see interacting with students to help students succeed because you're spending a lot of time with a student and you couldn't possibly have that much time if you had more students or if you were at a huge or larger school. All right, so that's not only size, I see people here so committed to students, so reaching out and going the extra mile, inviting students to lunch, to dinner, to their homes. I took one of the honor students home with me for

Thanksgiving. That's nothing special, nothing special at all, just because she lived in Bulgaria. And I know that a lot of our faculty do that. The dean took the winning competition teams out to lunch a couple of times too. He's made himself very available. And look at President Sargent,⁸ who is accessible to students through open office hours and in many other ways. He's called me to advocate for students. Everyone has—they get involved; they can get involved no matter how high a level they are. I haven't heard Provost Meservey⁹ yet, but I'm sure I will; if she had some student worker that needed something, she probably wouldn't hesitate to call someone who could help. So that goes on a lot at Suffolk. I hope you've experienced that.

FIDLER: I've only been here for two semesters, but I have a little bit, yes.

LERMAN: It's just a very caring community and a community that sincerely wants students to succeed and behaves in a way to help students succeed. I've seen that at every level, from our receptionist Mary Hill right up to the president's office.

FIDLER: How has the way you've looked at Suffolk changed over the years?

LERMAN: Oh wait, can I answer that question a little more? I'm sorry. And also, for a school our size, we're very diverse. It's wonderful. Look at the international population; the students say to me, Oh, they spoke three different languages in the elevator. It's so exciting to ride up in the elevator. And to be in a class—our faculties say, Our class is so exciting. For example, if it's a course on business ethics and there are people from ten or twelve different countries in the class, everyone will have a different point of view that other people will hear and it's exciting and enormously educational.

FIDLER: Yeah, that is very important.

LERMAN: You get to appreciate the different cultures because we see them. And we have the prayer room for Muslim students, and I think we're the only one in Boston. There's probably one

⁸ David J. Sargent graduated from Suffolk Law School in 1954, then served as a law faculty member from 1956 to 1973, dean of the law school from 1973 to 1989, and has been president of Suffolk University since 1989.

⁹ Patricia M. Meservey served as provost and academic vice president of Suffolk University from 2004 to 2007.

at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], but they're in Cambridge. I'm very proud of that, so that different groups can feel comfortable here, whether it's through their club, or advising situation or student activities or religious affiliation. Yeah, that's been wonderful.

Our Senegal students—you just learn so much. When I was in a group meeting with my ambassadors—the ambassadors a year or two ago, we had one woman from Senegal on the team. She saw things differently. She saw things from what I would call a tribal point of view, so she sort of looked out for the whole group and saw things that way, where some other students didn't have that perspective. I thought it was an interesting perspective to have, and Americans don't exactly have that all-encompassing perspective. They want to get *their* point across. I don't want to stereotype Americans, but they don't exactly have a tribal—that kind of background where everyone in the community has something to contribute, and is a very, very valuable member.

So did I cover what was distinct about Suffolk for me in the commonwealth? We also have in the business school, a very special accreditation in the accounting—for our accounting programs, which is very rare in the Northeast. So we have a regular accreditation, a business accreditation and an accounting accreditation, which very few business schools have. And then we have the NASPA, which is the National Association of Public Administration, so that makes us even more distinct for a small business school, or a moderate size, small to moderate. And our CPA [Certified Public Accountant] pass rate is the highest in Massachusetts, and very high—that's the test for accountants, certified public accountant test. So we have one of the highest pass rates in the country and probably the highest in Massachusetts. And I know that other areas of Suffolk have similar distinctions. I'm not so familiar with them in the Law School and in Arts and Sciences. Although I think our theater is remarkable. Marilyn Plotkins¹⁰ is doing an outstanding job. The theater is a well-known regional theater as well as local, and as a college theater it's rated very highly, very highly. The student productions, I wouldn't ever miss a production.

FIDLER: Yeah, I just saw the most recent one.

¹⁰ Marilyn Plotkins, PhD, is chair and director of the Theatre Department.

LERMAN: I wanted to see that, I missed it because—I'll tell you about that in a minute. I didn't want—how was it?

FIDLER: It was very good, very good. The newly renovated theater's¹¹ very nice.

LERMAN: Oh, that theater is so beautiful. We've had business students who have played a nice role in the theater. One had a very good role in *Cabaret* and we've had students working in production, sets, lighting. My daughter, when she was here and at NESAD, worked in the theater too, on set, and learned an awful lot. Now, I couldn't go this weekend because I was invited to go to the African American Museum's Two Hundredth Anniversary of the African Meeting House. My daughter and I went because the company she works for donated the flowers and they couldn't—the owners couldn't go so they said to her, Why don't you take your mom to this elegant event at the Four Seasons? And I didn't think we'd meet anyone—the minute she walked in, she saw a fellow NESAD alum and he had a nice role—he was playing a historical role, so he was dressed up in a historical costume and told stories about an African slave family of two hundred years ago.

And all of a sudden I saw Yvonne Wells from the psych department, and then I saw Eric Lee, who is the executive director of diversity services in the president's office, and they said, Well, you know, we have a Suffolk table, and I said, "Oh we're sitting at table twenty-seven." They had given us a number, and Yvonne and Eric said, You must sit at the Suffolk table. So at the Suffolk table was Eric, Yvonne, and a young faculty member from the government department, I'm sorry, I don't remember her name, and there was a Suffolk alum, another Suffolk alum, and us and other people, and Governor Deval Patrick was there. I couldn't be more excited. He's such a wonderful speechmaker; he just speaks so well. And his wife was there; she speaks very well too. And Mayor [Thomas] Menino was there, mumbling. I like him very much but he's quite a mumbler. (both laugh) It was really hard. And I was watching him on the screen because as well as having the in-person podium, people were on the screen and we were sitting right near the screen so I was watching his lips. It was really hard to make out what he was saying, but I got

¹¹ Suffolk University's 399-seat C. Walsh Theatre, located at 55 Temple Street, was built in the early 1920s and renovated from 2006 to 2007.

the gist of it. I think he was introducing one of the honorees. It was called Living Legends in the African American Community and it's one of the most thrilling events I ever went to, so exciting.

How did I get there from what we were talking about? (both laugh) Sorry.

FIDLER: (laughs) It's okay. I believe we were talking about the theater.

LERMAN: Oh the theater! Yes! (laughs) Well that fellow that Cressida knew was in many theater productions here at Suffolk. Yes, that's a very big plus. And all the centers we have, the beautiful buildings; and we're right downtown where all the jobs are. What we tell our students and what the co-op tells us, there are probably more jobs available than students, and I think this is many times the case. When our students look for internships I think they're saying there are more internships available in business, and so many of our students work. Well, now that we have the res. halls, less work than used to. When I first came I think something like 85 percent or 90 percent of business students said they worked as well as go to school, and these were full-time students. Now it's different because of the res. halls. Yes, what else makes us distinctive is our beautiful green buildings.

(beeping) Excuse me. That's for my asthma medication, which I'm doing very fine now so I don't have to take that.

So our beautiful green buildings, our centers like the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Center for Innovation and Change Leadership and the International—Center for International Studies. Oh, do we just have many wonderful centers of excellence in the university. And I could probably think of a lot more (Fidler laughs) distinctive things of what makes Suffolk wonderful and appealing to college students, but I will go on to your next question.

FIDLER: Well actually, that kind of brought me to a different question. One I was going to ask a little bit later, but relates—how do you feel about Suffolk being a hundred years old now?

We're in our centennial year; there's been celebrations all the last two semesters. What are your thoughts on that and on the history of Suffolk?

LERMAN: It's been so exciting. It's been so busy because of the centennial also, but look what a wonderful opportunity it is for our community to, first of all, be in the limelight of a centennial and all the wonderful events that the community can go to, and not only the Suffolk community but also the community that we live in, the Boston community, can come to our Centennial events. And it's the students who have come here last year and this year while we are celebrating must be so thrilled and excited by the visitors we've had, the speakers. It's just been quite a unique celebration and they've done an excellent job with it. I just love the logo; I think I mentioned that before. It's very exciting for me and I think that it's wonderful to know that for a hundred years we've stood for access in education, and some of the things—access and excellence of course—and some of the things that President Sargent speaks about that mean the most to me and other people who are listening, and faculty say it all the time to me when we leave a presentation in which Sargent has spoken, and he tells the wonderful story of how the law school began for people who—for students who weren't welcome anywhere else.

Then he proceeds to talk about how we've opened our doors to many students who weren't welcome elsewhere; perhaps some of the first women, some of the first African Americans, and other groups received their education here, especially in the law school. And we've continued to be so proud of that and continued to talk about it. He talks about it all the time. I never get tired of hearing him speak about it; it's always as if it's the first time because you can't hear it enough. You wish everyone in the world would be listening to him when he says that we won't let anyone stand in the way of progress or education for people of color, for people of different cultures, for peoples of different abilities, gender equality, for people of different sexual orientations, and he goes on and on again. And it's speaking to all of our hearts because we love that environment, that welcoming environment at Suffolk, too, and it means a lot to us, to the students, to the faculty, to the administrators. Did I answer your question?

FIDLER: Yes, absolutely. It has been a wonderful celebration. I was lucky enough to transfer here just in time.

LERMAN: Where'd you transfer from?

FIDLER: County College. I came here just in time for the centennial.

LERMAN: I'm so glad.

FIDLER: What do you believe the future of Suffolk holds? Where would you like it to go? What would you like to change?

LERMAN: (long pause) Okay, I'll be positive and then I'll talk about change. (pause) I'm excited about the direction of being exposed to more information. The upgrading of the libraries for undergraduates and graduate students as well, I mean the law school library is probably in the top percentage of law school libraries and the technology in the law school is rated very highly, and our library is too, but I wonder if the technology—well, that's a place for growth, so that the other schools and programs can have that access to excellent technology that the law school has. Maybe they're the leader and they're showing us a model and so that's the model that we'll look toward when we talk about technology supporting the undergraduate and graduate programs, so that's an excellent direction that we've been going in.

And the facilities, the upgrading of facilities. I can't speak to everything, but every new facility has been, as far as I know, a sustainable building, has been state of the art, has been architecturally aesthetic and recognized by awards in architecture and in building technology and management. So that the classrooms and programs must be going in that direction so that we would have the state-of-the-art science laboratories and equipment to sustain those programs and to give students the best opportunities in those fields. And that our classrooms would all be case classrooms, and I know it's going that way because many of the classrooms in Sawyer¹² already are beautiful media case classrooms. So I see that direction—these are excellent positive directions.

¹² Suffolk University's Frank Sawyer Building is located at 8 Ashburton Place.

Let me think; there's technology and facilities. I think it was wonderful and very—an intelligent move to have a provost who is the provost of the separate entities at Suffolk. I'll just speak on behalf of the Sawyer School and the College. We would like to have more collaborations. It's very important. There are fields that students need to know about that aren't housed in one school. For example, in business, you would want to know a lot about green business, green buildings, green design, sustainable policies, and Pat Hogan,¹³ who's chair of the environmental engineering program has taught courses for us, but I'd love to see a combined program in green business which is a combination of a department of ours and several departments in arts and sciences and all of our majors.

For example, I could see lots of collaborations between the schools. NESAD—we list some NESAD courses now in our information systems program, but we could have a marketing graphic design or business administration and arts and theater. People could just come here to one school to get that instead of going somewhere else; we'd have the resources. I mean, the resources in terms of a program and department exists, of course in order to do that you might need more faculty and more classrooms, something we are terribly short of, but I know that we're headed in the direction of increasing the classrooms. So I think that would be a positive development, and the provost being at the administrative head would like to see a lot more collaboration between the different schools, so we'll be seeing more of that.

(pauses) I think because we're in downtown Boston, a growth in student population is very difficult.

FIDLER: I was just going to ask you that, about growth of campus.

LERMAN: Okay, well that's part of the direction in which we're going. It's so wonderful to be in downtown Boston, so many plusses for our students. They walk around the corner for their internships. All the big companies are there and if they're lucky they get jobs in those companies they're interning in, and many of them do. However, we just were disappointed in not getting

¹³ Patricia Hogan, PhD, directs the environmental engineering program, which is part of Suffolk's Physics Department.

another res. hall and it could have been a beautiful student center as well which we now need, and we've outgrown our other student centers, our lovely building in Ridgeway with a wonderful gym. So yeah, we desperately need a student center to serve the students who are here now and to support all the wonderful things that Student Activities are doing, and the cocurricular life here is very rich, very rich and wonderful.

But downtown Boston has its limitations and I don't know if we could get many more buildings. That is, maybe we'll be lucky enough to get to house our plans somewhere else, the building that we lost, maybe we could find another space. But then, if you go on from there, to increase the student undergraduate body further—because I don't know much about the graduate programs anymore because I'm not in touch with them that much now—we would need so many more classroom facilities and that doesn't seem possible; where can we get them? So at the same time, I think if we can have a goal of a good size for Suffolk University—I think perhaps the law school has found a good size for themselves; they cut back I think to the number they have today. I don't know if I'm suggesting we cut back, but I'm suggesting that we don't continue to grow without the facilities to support, and student resources and academic resources to support the students we have now. So I don't know how much we'd be growing in student body; that doesn't make a lot of sense.

FIDLER: Or if it's possible because of space?

LERMAN: Yeah, or if it's possible because of space. (pauses) The other directions that I can see at this point for faculty—it's very important that we all continue to improve along with guidelines of our accrediting agencies and NEASC, especially, our regional accreditor, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and they're focusing very much now on student learning outcomes so we'll have to be spending—we are spending plenty of time now with our new curriculum and learning assurance plans across our whole undergraduate, both the college and the business school. So we'll have to be spending a lot more time looking at student outcomes and taking—spending more time on assessment. That's just curriculum; both curriculums have just been revitalized, so I don't see any great changes within the next five years, really, except updating your curriculum, so we'll see how the four credits works out.

FIDLER: That's next semester, correct?¹⁴

LERMAN: That's right, we'll see how that works out. And certainly the honors programs in both schools are growing and I see that the quality and preparation of students has increased enormously in the years that I've been here, as well as the diversity of the student body. I'd say, and our faculty agree, that students are coming in with—are better prepared for college with more achievements—academic achievements and honors and more cocurricular experiences, especially service learning in the last few years. I'd love to see service grow as a part of our university. In the school we like to say that our theme across all programs is LINKS, Leadership, Innovation, Networking, Knowledge, and Service, so in the business school plenty of faculty are incorporating service learning in their work. So I'm very proud of our volunteer programs, and almost all the students I know, with the busy students, the students in clubs, the students in full-time classes, or ambassadors, or everyone who's so busy with work, and school life and family and everything, make time for volunteer work either in our own community as tutors, or working with SOULS [Suffolk's Organization for Uplifting Lives through Service], or in the neighborhood communities. Did I answer that? Your question so far?

FIDLER: Yes, definitely. I guess, is there anything else you'd like to add about Suffolk? Any key points? Your history at Suffolk? Or your life? Anything that I may have missed that you feel is very important that you would like to tell the world?

LERMAN: I'm sure I'm prejudiced here, but I love our Suffolk students and our students are very special from just what I said before. For making time for everything, for putting so much time into helping other students succeed and taking all challenging courses and being the presidents or e-board members of clubs and working with student government or with the newspaper or other wonderful opportunities and going to internships and maybe end up going home to the family or watching siblings or adults. They're just a unique group of students. I just love them; they're wonderful. I love working with them. It's a great joy.

¹⁴ In the fall of 2007, Suffolk University's College of Arts and Sciences and Sawyer Business School switched from a three-credit curriculum to a four-credit curriculum.

FIDLER: Very rewarding?

LERMAN: Very rewarding.

FIDLER: Okay, well I want to thank you very much for taking time today do this interview, unless there's anything else you'd like to add.

LERMAN: I can't think of anything right now. Thank you so much.

FIDLER: Okay, thank you very much.

LERMAN: I enjoyed it. (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW