

INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN KOCH

INTERVIEWED BY RUSS MAGNAGHI

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START OF INTERVIEW

Russ Magnaghi (RM): Interview with Susan Koch, Northern Michigan University, Provost and Academic Vice President, Marquette, MI. June 1st, 2011. Okay, good morning, Susan. My first question for everybody is: what is your birth date?

Susan Koch (SK): July 24th, 1949.

RM: Okay, now what I'd like to do is start out with just a little of your background. Where you came from and how you got to Northern Michigan University.

SK: Okay, well I'm originally from South Dakota. Grew up in a small town in South Dakota, went to a small university in South Dakota. My husband was a professor at that university.

RM: What was the—?

SK: Dakota State University in Madison, South Dakota. Moved onto Iowa and started my career in high school. Taught high school for five years and then went back to graduate school, eventually earned my Masters Degree and Doctorate from the University of Northern Iowa and then became a faculty member at Northern Iowa. I was there for many years as a faculty member and help promotion. I worked my way up through the ranks there to full professor then became ____ Provost and Graduate Dean. I served as the Administrator there for ten years and then accepted the _____ Provost at Northern Michigan University in July of 2007.

RM: When you started your career, did you have any idea that you were going to go on into Administration or anything like that?

SK: I always enjoyed leadership activities from a young age. So, it was somewhat of a natural progression for me. I enjoy kind of the competitive nature of getting external grants and things like that and that led to additional responsibilities and it really was kind of a natural pathway for me. Not that I necessarily imagined that I would be a Provost specifically or a Chancellor specifically but it really does feel like a pretty natural progression.

RM: So, when you were doing it, it was like climbing a ladder? You went step by step?

SK: Yes, absolutely.

RM: I'm just making observations here. I don't know if you knew but there were, over the years, there had been many ties between the state of Ohio, Ohio State University and specifically Northern—not Ohio, I meant Iowa.

SK: Ties between Iowa and NMU?

RM: Right, President Hart came from Montezuma, Iowa and Dean H _____ taught math at—he was here, he was a longer serving Dean and he taught at Northern Iowa. So, over the years those are the ones that I can remember right off the top but there were quite a few others so it's kind of interesting that you continued with that tradition.

SK: Well, it's not that far away, you know. It's still Mid-West.

RM: Now, when you came to Northern, anything about the process? Was there anything different or unique about getting the job here or was it just you applied for it and you went through the process.

SK: No, I don't think there was anything unusual about it. My husband and I had a campus visit in February. Everyone always talks about the weather in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan but we were both from South Dakota so it's actually much colder where we're from. So, unlike a lot of people, we weren't daunted at all by the weather. In fact, we love winter and that was a selling point for us and in fact, in retrospect, has turned out to be one of the most wonderful things about being here is that it is such a spectacular environment. So, I do remember many really very positive conversations with the _____ committee and just having a sense of this would be a good fit from very early on.

RM: Now, what were some of the—let's say, when you got into the position, what were some of the challenges that you faced or observed that you were going to have to face when you came into the division?

SK: Well, I think the biggest challenge of the past four years has been the budget. You know, the state of Michigan, the entire state has been hit so hard by the recession and the very, very slow recovery and the lack of support for higher education, the lack of reform for tax laws and other areas in state government. That has been, I think, the biggest challenge really for all of us because there are restrictions on what you're able to do when you're in a declining budget situation. So, I think that really has been the most difficult challenge.

RM: We're not going to get into you know, specifics of _____ but are there some general ideas that you'd like to share with us on how you met that challenge?

SK: Well, I think that I'm very sure that we have managed our resources very wisely. One thing that I think was a very good decision was that the President and I and the VP for Finance made a commitment to support innovation, no matter how difficult the budget. By implementing the Wildcat _____ Fund in the fall of 2007 and continuing that, we have been able to support a number of really good innovative ideas despite the _____ budgeted. That's something that I shared nationally, that really has been admired and appreciated by others and more important, I think it's led to some really good innovations. Not every project has been successful and that's fine, you learn a lot from failures as well. I

think that has been, even though it's relatively small scale, I think that's been a good thing. I think another aspect of the challenge that I think we've worked very hard to address and have made some progress on, is just the idea of realizing that you really have to know who you are, you have to get focused on what we can be best at in the world, as Jim Collins said. You have to start to focus your resources in a more narrow way because you just cannot do everything in the world and I think that we've had a lot of really good conversations with the educational policies committee and that identified priority areas. I think that will move ahead and will be a very good thing for the University.

RM: Now, do you feel that some of these developments that you were involved with, given the difficult time, do you think these will continue on into the future? Has this become sort of part of the, even when the economy improves, are these innovations that will continue as part of the universities...

SK: Well, of course I really hope so. I really do think that NMU is on a path towards being a better and better institution and we can always be better. I think NMU can be a terrific university but we have to really keep pushing ourselves very, very hard to be more and more innovative, more and more productive and that's challenging. It really is very, very challenging.

RM: With this Wildcat Initiative, could you comment on the response from the faculty?

SK: Well, the participation really has been very robust. It's a very competitive process, every cycle that has gone by there have been a few projects funded and more projects not funded. I think as the process has matured, it is now three years in, I think people realize that they really have to have their ideas in very good form. They have to present a very solid argument and of course most importantly, it has to really match up with the strategic priorities of the University. Faculty who are looking for ways to see the innovation, this is one good way for them to pursue an idea.

RM: When you got here, was the road map to 2015, was that in place when you got here?

SK: No. We did it. We did it during my first year, '07- '08 and we rolled it out in the spring of '08. So, that was of course, a huge part of the Provost's job, to really help meet that effort and to really get those priorities in order. I must say, and of course, a strategic plan is never ever completely take to heart by everyone in the community but I've had a great deal of experience with strategic planning over my career and this strategic plan, in my experience, I think has been implemented more thoroughly than most. I think something that I'm impressed with is that we've all done quite well is we identified those three themes. Those three themes are the importance of recognizing the value of our location in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, which is absolutely a unique aspect of the University, the importance of internationalization every aspect of the student's experience and the importance of technology. These are the three themes that will just undergird all of our efforts. Those themes are just exceedingly important and I think we see them playing themselves out more and more across the University in very, very positive ways. President Obama would not have come to NMU if technology was not a central theme of what we do. It's just one example.

RM: How have you, from your position, seen the faculty/ staff respond to _____?

SK: Well, I think it's varied. As I said, you never have a situation where everybody gets on board, never. I would argue though, you don't need everybody as long as you've got innovative folks that really, really want to move the University forward. I have seen many projects, whether they were funded by the Wildcat Innovation Fund or developed some other way, become very, very successful and contribute very significantly to the University's strategic position. So many example come to mind that you know, I hate to even name any because there are so many good ones but a few that just pop into my mind are under the leadership of Dan Truckey, the director of the Beaumier Heritage Center, the International Performing Artist series has become a _____ element to the opportunities that are offered to people on campus and throughout the community to experience high quality, international performing artists from all over the world in a community that couldn't possibly do that without NMU taking the lead on that. I'm very proud of that and I give Dan all the credit for really, really making that look—I'm very, very excited about the way NMU's interest in an expertise regarding the Upper Peninsula, Upper Michigan and everything that represents is growing and growing and blooming in so many ways. We have a major _____ in Wildlife Management that is just wonderful, spectacular. We have more and more faculty that are doing research related to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, researching Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. We're going to have a journal on our studies that is going to be an absolutely signature publication that comes from this University that will be valued far beyond this University. We have new faculty that are experiencing orientations to where they are every year and I think all of those things are helping people understand that being in this place, the University has a great responsibility and amazing opportunities to engage in research that no one else can do. I couldn't be more excited about that. It's very, very important to me.

RM: I just make a passing off _____ for the record. Over the years, I've always promoted that idea of using the region as a major resource for all of this.

SK: As we both know, you and I are exactly in sync on that particular idea.

RM: So, I was very glad with the quality—when I saw the roadmap I said, "Ah, someone listened."

SK: Of course, you were the original voice for recognizing the value of that. I think that will be a part of your legacy.

RM: I wouldn't go that but it's good to hear that it worked out. Are there any other major focuses during your tenure that you want to comment on?

SK: Well, I'd like to think that there is a growing realization that the Teacher's Scholar Model is something that NMU can do exceedingly well. We have many faculty members who are wonderful teachers and at the same time, doing really important scholarly work and that scholarly work includes creative activity that I think is second to none. I mean, there is this growing realization for example, that our school of Art and Design is something very special. It can compete with Rhode Island with Savannah with Pratt. We went to Milan this year, you know, along with MIT and Columbia. This program and the artists who teach in it are phenomenal and NMU can compete at a very, very high level and that kind of excellence is bringing us better and better student who want to study with these faculty members. I think that increasing realization that NMU is built on the foundation of a normal school like almost every

other regional university. It was founded because Michigan needed teachers in the Upper Peninsula. Over the years, just like all those other regional schools, it grew and became a university at the same time as all those other regional schools and then it became many other things. It can still be really excellent at some things and one of those things is Art and Design. Another is exercise and sports science. Again, taking off in this amazing location where you have all these opportunities, excellence in the biological sciences and environmental related research, another opportunity. We've got budding centers of excellence in the case of Art and Design, it's in full _____. We could have others. I think the history and the sociology and the anthropology of the Upper Peninsula is another area that we are making tremendous progress and more can happen. It's all based on that commitment to the Teacher Scholar Model. The realization that my responsibilities as a faculty member at a regional University are first, to be an excellent teacher, to provide my student with a great education experience and second, to have a robust line of research that hopefully engages my students and compliments their educational experience. I really think that Teacher Scholar Model is really important at NMU and I've seen many, many faculty that live it everyday and I just really admire that kind of performance.

RM: Now this might be kind of getting into a somewhat statistical area, since the time you came in '07, was it noticeable that this change was taking place with the faculty and that they were becoming more focused on scholarships or could it not be identified?

SK: Well, I think so. I think it's been noticeable and I should cite as well that there have been very, very important changes in the collective bargaining agreement that had helped support this realization. First of all, and this has taken many years so it goes back even before my time, the University has embraced the _____ Model for scholarship. Meaning that, we understand a scholarship can mean more than the scholarship of discovery, it can also mean the scholarship of integration and application and the research about teaching. It's a bigger tent and more kinds of faculty can fit under that bigger tent which I think is very appropriate. That dialogue and those definitions are now incorporated into the collective bargaining agreement. I think more importantly, we have placed additional support for scholarship as well as a clear definition of expectations. So, not only have we agreed, the faculty and the board have agreed to these expectations but the University is also investing more resources in helping faculty to achieve these expectations and some of those new resources are actually in the contract. For example, with more release time for the faculty members to do that kind of work but there are also many, many other examples and I'll give you one that is fresh in mind because it just happened last week. Last week, we provided a workshop for faculty on how to get published. Forty-five faculty members participated in that workshop and that's a very robust number. So, I'm very confident that the University will continue to support those kinds of efforts because certainly on the administrative side, after all, I've been a faculty member all my life, I understand the balance that you have to _____ and I understand the need to provide resources for people to do their work. So, I feel that there's been a noticeable increase in that and you know, we do have some data to support it because when you look at the CD's of faculty members we see increased evidence.

RM: We were talking about legacy and so on. First we'll go with the negative end, what would you say is the one thing or things that you were not able to accomplish that you would've hoped to accomplish or an obstacle?

SK: That's such an interesting question. I don't think one ever leaves a job feeling like you got everything done that you wanted to do. I can't imagine that that would ever happen because you always have so many more things that you would love to do. I have believed from early on, that NMU should have a center for the environment of some kind. Although, it's on the drawing board, it has not come _____ under my administration and I hope it will. I'm sorry it didn't happen here but I hope it will and I believe it will. We've also been working collaboratively with the hospital, discussing a proposal for a Center for Human Performance. I absolutely believe that could happen here as well. I think that's a good possibility. Those are a couple of examples.

RM: Coming from kind of a similar environment—you come from a large metropolitan area, do you feel that there is, in terms of getting these things done, there is a certain challenge that you face like at Northern in terms of the faculty, in many cases, sort of down playing the institution and not fully realizing that for instance, the Art and Design Department is a nationally recognized department with all sorts of results coming from it and so on. Do you feel that that is not so much for Northern but for the transformed normal schools that didn't have a long reputation, you know, that University of Michigan can go back to 1817 and so on, so they have long tradition. Most of these normal schools were converted into four year or multi- concerns in the 1960's, so the history is relatively short. Do you find that you're going against the current? I mean, you have a challenge to get people on board to realize that they are an institution that can make a difference and it's not just the whole, "Well, we have an Art and Design Department, it can be mediocre. We're not going to do anything about it." Or as they've done, pushed ahead and created a department with a national and some would say international reputation. Do you see that as kind of a challenge that you have to face as provost?

SK: Well, I think every university has a course, has its own heritage. Some of it is just wonderful and proud and you know, as Newton used to say, "You're standing on the shoulders of giants and that's the reason you can see far." And that's very positive but I think all universities also have a bit of a legacy that is not a legacy of greatness, it is more a legacy of—I can't quite think of the right adjective but even less than normality. President Wong refers to it as students or even employees sometimes calling NMU just NMU. I have often heard him say, "Don't say that in my presence because we're not just NMU." I don't buy the "just NMU," because NMU can be a great institution and it has elements of greatness right now. You asked I think, if I see that attitude from anyone and of course the answer is yes. Yes, you do but I don't accept it because NMU has—yes, the budgets are difficult. They're difficult everywhere. NMU has the talent and the resources to be a great institution. Right now, it can be great and it's moving toward greatness. Yes, I do see occasionally the "just NMU" attitude. I don't accept it. I'm excited about great things for this University in the future. I'm going to be keeping track and to be watching it. Frankly, not only do I not buy it, from my perspective, there is a certain lack of loyalty to that kind of attitude. Why wouldn't one want to go into work everyday and give ones best, everyday and try to be a better employee tomorrow than I was today? I don't understand why one wouldn't want to do that because I wouldn't want to work somewhere where I didn't really want to go in and give my best to my employer. That's where my future comes from and I think I owe my employer nothing less than that. So, you know, I really honestly don't get people who don't feel that way.

RM: Do you think now, kind of _____ the answer, do you think then with some of these things that we've done now with the Roadmap to 2015 and so on and you've mentioned earlier the Wildcat Initiative and son, do you think that is sort of making a change with the faculty?

SK: I think its helping. I hope its helping but it's not enough because every employee of the University, including every faculty member and every administrator and every employee has to take person responsibility for achieving the institutional mission. Students are the heart of our mission. We come to work everyday because we want to provide students with the best possible educational experience. I really believe every single faculty member and every staff member needs to be really committed to that. I've always been committed to that and I just can't accept anything less then that commitment from anyone.

RM: Now, that was sort of the negative questions. What do you think your legacy — is there any one thing that you would consider will be your legacy at Northern or what was your major accomplishment? What would you consider a major accomplishment with your time at Northern?

SK: Well, I think that the improvements in the collective bargaining agreement are important and they will live on for a long time and others will build on them in positive ways. I think that will be very good for the University, very good for my faculty colleagues and very good for students. So, I think that will be, legacy is a pretty strong word, but that's something that I feel satisfied about. I hope that the realization that NMU's location is critically important will also be a part of my legacy. Finally, I hope the people will remember me as someone who made every decision with integrity, who cared deeply about students and employees and I certainly have made every effort to keep those interests in students, in my colleagues, in what is best for the University in the mission at the heart of what I've done. You really should ask somebody else what my impact has been. The last person that really knows is probably the person who is leaving but I guess those are just kind of my hopes. Whether they're true or not, I don't really know.

RM: Is there any final—something I didn't ask or you feel that I've left out of the interview? Is there something you'd like to add?

SK: I think the only other thing that I would—just a couple of other things that I would like to add. First, I would like to add that I have really enjoyed my time serving as Provost at NMU. It has been a privilege. A privilege that most people never get and I will always appreciate the opportunity to have worked at NMU and served as Provost. I am leaving with the memory of many wonderful colleagues and those memories will be precious to me forever. The other thing I would say is that I have really enjoyed living in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It's something that I never anticipated that I would do. I had never been here until I had an interview. My family loved the place and my husband and I have made it our business to really explore the Upper Peninsula, not nearly as thoroughly as we would like but it is a very, very special place. We have really enjoyed being a part of this community.

RM: Now, to finish up, and now your new position for the record.

SK: I am the chancellor at the University of Illinois at Springfield and that is one of three campuses at that University.

RM: Well, I'll just end with a thank you and I also want to thank you for all the support that you gave me and the Center for U.P Studies and that legacy will continue.

SK: Oh I know it, I know it will. That's great.

RM: Thanks.

SK: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW