

DU ORAL HISTORY 1984-2014

Interviewee: Michele (Mike) Bloom

Interviewer: James (Jim) R. Griesemer

Recorded: August 12, 2019

Place: Denver, CO

Transcriber: Terry L. Zdrale

Transcript

- Intro: [00:00](#) Series introduction.
- Jim Griesemer: [00:19](#) Welcome to the University of Denver's oral history. The interviews in this series present a panorama of progress against steep odds stories told by women and men who were personally involved in saving the university and undertaking an extraordinary process of renewal. We've divided our story into three parts. The first, DU's fiscal crisis of the 1980's, which was virtually a perfect storm of financial adversity. Then, in the early 1990's the dramatic financial turnaround as DU pulled back from the brink, followed by a tide of renewal, a decade that saw new buildings, remarkable growth and academic innovation that moved the university onto the national stage. To continue our story, I'm joined by Michele Bloom, known to everybody at the university as Mike Bloom. Mike Bloom joined DU in 1989 when DU was just about to begin its remarkable financial turnaround and academic renewal. Mike, welcome to DU's oral history.
- Mike Bloom: [01:26](#) Thank you, Jim.
- Jim Griesemer: [01:28](#) What career path Mike, led you to the university in the first place?
- Mike Bloom: [01:33](#) Well, I'll have to say it was not the traditional academic path. I have an undergraduate degree in speech therapy and a graduate degree from DU in special education. And with that education, I primarily worked in healthcare institutions, healthcare and rehabilitation, mental health settings. And, I think that was one of the really valuable things that happened in my career. That is, as I moved from one sector to another from healthcare back to higher education. There was a kind of accumulation of knowledge of different systems and different ways of doing things,

thinking about things, that I think was very valuable to me. My career path was not the usual one, was not planned in the traditional sense. I was always in situations that were new or developing and had the chance to create new programs, to develop new ideas. And I came back to the university after being here as a student. I came back to join university college as the director of the Health Care Organization and Systems program in 1989.

- Jim Griesemer: [02:56](#) And that program was very successful. And then you moved to the University of Denver's Weekend College, as it was called at the time. (Yes.) When, when was that about?
- Mike Bloom: [03:10](#) That was in 1993, February of 93. I had been at University College for almost four years. Interestingly, my, my arrival at University College preceded Dan Richie's arrival as chancellor by about a month. So we were here pretty much simultaneously. But the weekend college had been a part of the Colorado Women's College that was acquired by DU in 1982 and the Weekend College program was the one program that the university continued and it continued as part of the College of Business. It was a very innovative idea for its time. It was a weekend program that enabled women who were working full time to return to school on the weekend and earn a bachelor's degree.
- Jim Griesemer: [04:05](#) And that program had been going on then at Colorado Women's College, (Yes.) Transferred over to DU (Correct.) And it was a weekend program for women who were working. Is that essentially correct?
- Mike Bloom: [04:18](#) That's right. The women, it was very interesting. It was a very interesting time. Many of the women had benefited from the hiring practices of large companies that were anxious to recruit women. There were five companies in the Denver area at that time that supported 80% of the students at the weekend college. They supported their tuition fully and that made it possible for women to go back to school and to earn a bachelor's degree, which was absolutely necessary for advancement.
- Jim Griesemer: [04:54](#) Right. Now, when you move to the weekend college it had gone through some changes in leadership. What did you, as

you looked at it, what did you see as the, as the challenges and the potential opportunities that were there?

- Mike Bloom: [05:11](#) Oh, I thought the, the thing that was the most positive to me was that as I got to know the women and the students, understood the kind of commitment and drive and sense of purpose that they had about their education. That was a real asset and it was something that we built on very intentionally. The women were average age 38 range from 20 years to 72. My oldest graduate was 72 and organizationally we were part of the college business at that time. And, as I mentioned, most of the students were supported in their tuition by their company and their company's benefits. Although the university had reduced its tuition in the non-traditional women's program so that it was more affordable for women who, who wanted to return to school. The challenges, I think came from the fact that the, the program was pretty, well-known at DU and was seen as a kind of jewel in the crown, but it was not much known beyond that. And when I was hired Dean Bruce Hutton was the dean and his challenge was to make it grow. I want it to be something really special. And that, of course was a welcome invitation for me. He wanted to see us go beyond the limitations of our location, which was the secondary campus of the university. And interestingly, one of the challenges was that the name Weekend College did not really convey who we were and what we did.
- Jim Griesemer: [07:06](#) Let's talk about that a little bit. That change of name, much more came, but that change of name struck me as a really important kind of conceptual notion in terms of reaching out.
- Mike Bloom: [07:19](#) Absolutely. It, to be known as the Weekend College was simply to say, this is a place that you can get a degree on the weekend. (Yeah.) And that was interesting and attractive to people. But to be known as the Women's College of the University of Denver was a unique, singular kind of identity. There was not another women's college anywhere in the rocky mountain region, and we believed that the identity as a women's community and the identity as a University of Denver degree were the most valuable assets that we had to offer. We changed the name very deliberately to emphasize women and DU.

- Jim Griesemer: [08:08](#) Was there, was there something about the time and the place that this was happening that made, let's call it the emergence of the, of the women's college possible. What was going on that strikes you as in retrospect is really important?
- Mike Bloom: [08:27](#) Well, clearly the, the decade of the nineties, that was the right time. This was the right place for the Women's College to emerge and to become the success that it did become. It was a time Dan Ritchie had just come, you were serving as the vice chancellor for business and finance. There were some innovations in budgeting and the financial control of the university that I think promoted a kind of entrepreneurship. The deans or the directors were effectively small business owners and I thrived in that environment. I think that period of time that women's leadership became more important at DU. When I served as a dean, there were 10 deans and five were women, which was unusual at that time. The decade of the nineties was also an important time in the advancement of women nationally and locally into positions of political leadership and corporate leadership, community leadership. There was a lot of interest and talk about women's leadership and we built on that interest.
- Jim Griesemer: [09:51](#) As the Women's College was evolving through your leadership, it was still part of the school of business that, at that particular time, I was the dean of the business school. And I remember you and I having lots of talks about the Women's College having its own identity within DU but very distinctly apart from the business school or other or other colleges. As, as you thought about this and sort of visualized where the Women's College could go. What was your perspective at that?
- Mike Bloom: [10:24](#) We built the Women's College on a model of women's education and adult education that was somewhat different from other programs within the university, even other non-traditional programs. We were very much interested in the what was known about the developmental needs of women, particularly women learners. We were extremely focused on the particular characteristics and needs of our students. We knew who they were. We had a very large population of women of color. Almost 40% of our students described themselves as women of color and the age range I have

mentioned, but the diversity of the students was, was really quite extraordinary. And what held it all together, I think, and what made it possible for women to succeed in that setting, was the emphasis on community - learning and community. People saw other people, other women like themselves who were role models, faculty as well as other students.

Mike Bloom:

[11:43](#)

They learned in a diverse community which many described as the best learning about diversity that they had ever experienced. We had expanded our programs by the time we were talking about a separate college. We had expanded our programs to include a degree in communication, a degree in computer science and we were contemplating a degree in law and society. So, though the Daniel's college was our home base, we had relationships with three other colleges of the university. We had started doing some fundraising, particularly for scholarships and having the unique identity as a women's college we thought would be very, very helpful. But probably the biggest thing, was that the culture that we had created at the women's college was very much a fit for the mission that we had. I had a consultation at one point with the psychologist and organizational psychologist who described us as a cultivation culture and he thought it was one of the purest examples of a cultivation culture that he had ever witnessed. We, we focused quite deliberately, on teaching and learning. Everybody was teaching and learning all the time. And I saw that really is my primary role as a dean. I was constantly teaching, teaching staff, learning from the students, teaching students. It was, it was a culture of growth and opportunity and a culture of optimism that I think was, it was extremely appropriate for a mission.

Jim Griesemer:

[13:46](#)

No, not long after the Women's College went on its own from the business school, became its own distinct college. You had a conversation with Dan Richie who was of course the chancellor of the University at that time. Could you tell us a little bit about that conversation and the, and the story that evolved out of that conversation?

Mike Bloom:

[14:10](#)

I will. Oh, they were, there were two conversations. The first one came about, I remember distinctly getting a call from the chancellor's secretary saying, Mike, can you come over? Dan wants to see you. I didn't know what that was

about, but I got there and and learned that the university had the opportunity to sell the Park Hill campus and had decided to do so and that we would be moving the women's college back to the main campus in 90 days. And Dan's counsel was, don't worry, we will build a small administrative building that can house your staff and you can use the classrooms because your classes are on the weekends, so you can use the classrooms we've already built.

- Mike Bloom: [14:59](#) And I was pretty stunned, went away and thought about it a lot and said, this is an opportunity. This is not a crisis. This is an opportunity. And I made an appointment, went back and sat down with Dan. I said, Dan, I want to suggest something more, something different. If you'll give me a hundred days, I'll come back to you with a partner, with a vision and a plan and with a gift of \$1 million. He looked at me rather amused and he said, well, I think you could do that. And so I presented him the idea of creating a center for women's advancement. Creating a home for the Women's College community, but also for partners that we had developed relations relationships with who could co locate in the building with us and make for collaborative and collegial environment.
- Jim Griesemer: [16:11](#) So that, the decision was made. And I have to say that it surprise to everyone when we, we heard that, oh my goodness, we're going to have a center for women's advancement, and education of course. So that project, began to take shape, it actually in a pretty rapid fashion, (Yes.) But, talk a little bit about your, your direct involvement in that project as it began to come along.
- Mike Bloom: [16:42](#) We started the project, I think, in 2000 and we did have a partnership with the Women's Foundation. We had a major gift from Merle Chambers for whom the building is named. And we started the planning process and immediately ran into some difficulties with the neighborhood protesting the building of yet another building at DU. And so, we had to go through a process of rezoning the site. DU had made a site available. It was right on the edge of campus, which was a great location for us, but it had to be rezoned. And so we entered into an almost two year process of working with the neighbors, working with the city council, finally got the zoning approved and then moved into our, our fundraising

and active planning process. The fundraising was surprisingly not difficult. This was an opportunity for women to give to something for women and to give to bricks and mortar.

- Mike Bloom: [17:56](#) And, it was surprising how many women leaders and women philanthropists were interested in that opportunity and joined us. We raised the money. We initially thought we would need approximately 6 million. We raised closer to 10, which we did need and, and built a building by women for women. Early on I, I was working with the architects on the design of the entry to the building and Cab Childress, who was the architect emeritus for the University was sitting with me and with Jane Lofgren, the university architect, talking about what the entry needed to be. He was doodling and drawing at the time he was talking and he said, looked at Jane and he said, you see Jane, we have to have an entry that causes women, when they enter the building, to feel that they are significant.
- Jim Griesemer: [19:05](#) and indeed if one visits that entry, that's precisely what you, what you all achieved.
- Mike Bloom: [19:11](#) Exactly. It was a wonderful process for me. The, the building process. The university saw the Dean as the building owner. So I participated in all of the meetings with architects, contractors, created the basically the designs and worked with the choices of everything in the building. Everything.
- Jim Griesemer: [19:37](#) One of the things that's so unique about that program and structure is the set of relationships that are embodied, in the building and the activities that go on within the building. Could you describe those relationships and how they evolved because they're important part of the story. I know,
- Mike Bloom: [19:57](#) Well, the relationships that were created had not ever, nobody had done a building that way at the university. So we were, were forging new territory legally. We needed to create an agreement about how these different groups would fundraise together and work in the building together. And we did that. We also used the architectural design in a deliberate way to foster collaboration.
- Jim Griesemer: [20:35](#) And how, talk about that.

- Mike Bloom: [20:38](#) There are three stories in the building and we had a Women's College office on each floor. We had the other offices scattered on either first or second or third for the other organizations. We built, on each floor, a work room. That was the common place for making copies, getting coffee, assembling a project so that you had to come out of your office suite in order to do those everyday things and that inevitably put you in contact with others. We shared all of the common spaces, all of the meeting rooms, all of the classrooms so that when we were not using the classrooms for Women's College classes, they were available for conferences and meetings and other kinds of special events. So it was a very deliberate process and I think it was one of the features that many of the the donors responded to. They liked the idea of women, women's groups working together, not in isolation. (Right.) And sharing resources.
- Jim Griesemer: [21:53](#) After creating the Women's College and building what is a wonderful facility, you eventually retired at the end of 2006. And as we speak today, the Women's College is still in a process of evolution, but the set of relationships seems to be, continues to be a key part of of that. As you look back, what do you consider to be the principles or the directions that should guide women's education at the University of Denver and, and, and beyond?
- Mike Bloom: [22:29](#) I think there were, there were several ideas that were very important, but one is that the college had a very clear sense of purpose and a clear mission and deep knowledge of its students and their needs. So I think the idea of student-centered education really reached a peak during those years. And I think that's an important, important principle to carry forward probably for the education of all students, but especially students that had special needs as these did. And I think another principle was that the community itself was built on a culture of excellence and learning in community, learning from other students, learning from faculty, faculty and students, learning from each other. It was a very, very rich community. The commencement speech that I gave in 2006, my last graduation here, the theme of that speech was meaning and purpose. And I talked about how one has a life of meaning and purpose as I talked to the graduating students. But I, I emphasized that that particular day, represented the culmination of so much that we had worked for. That was the day that the 1,000th

woman graduated from DU with a bachelor's degree from the, from the Women's College, from the University, was an extremely important milestone and I think reflected the, the kind of culture and commitment that, that we had had.

Jim Griesemer: [24:37](#)

And, and, your college had a, has had an enormous impact on Denver, Colorado and beyond in terms of the activities, that women carried forth after, after leaving the college. One other thing I'd like to probe a little bit. In creating the college in, in transforming it, you dealt with lots of challenges and many opportunities. Stepping back, as you think about that whole process, what were the values that guided you personally? What was important to you from a kind of an ethical, moral and community perspective?

Mike Bloom: [25:27](#)

The month before I began my work at the Weekend College, the Women's College, I did a personal retreat and spent some time reflecting, on just those, those questions. Asking myself that now that I have this opportunity to be in the leadership role for the, for this college, what is it that I value most and what does that mean I must do? What is the action that comes from those values? And the words are used probably don't convey as much as the actions do, but the words I used were that I value inclusion. I wanted to include the entire university in this mission we were embarking on. To invite people to communicate, to ask the men to do this with us, not apart from us. And that was, that was unusual in non-traditional education, which often functioned very separately from the traditional. We had a partnership from the very beginning with the Daniels College so that we were, it was inclusive at that, even at that stage.

Mike Bloom: [26:54](#)

I think another of the values I would describe as a value for growth and optimism, for the realization of potential. I could see the possibilities in things and was driven to make them make those possibilities happen and to actualize the potential. I, one of the words I put on my list was integrity. And I meant by that something a little more than honesty and the kind of the usual idea of what Integrity means. To me it also means something about consistency and coherence and the meaning and the behavior and the messages all aligning. And the, the role of the leader was to, was to lead with that in mind. It was very much something that I intended. One of the words on my list with

beauty, and what I meant by that was that you have a choice about the way you do things. And if you choose beauty, you choose to do things carefully and correctly. And so that they're orderly and predictable and appealing and have beauty. And finally, I think there was a concept of respect that I hope that we adhered to so that, that we were teaching students, we were teaching each other how to respect the needs and the talents and the perspectives and the diverse contributions of the people who were a part of our community.

Jim Griesemer: [28:56](#)

Well Mike Bloom, thank you so much for joining us and your contributions to the university and to this, to this oral history. Thanks for sharing your insights. And indeed the women's college was really part of the great renewal of the university during that period.

Mike Bloom: [29:15](#)

I hope you'll join us in the future as we continue the story of the University of Denver's remarkable renaissance. I'm Jim Griesemer. Thank you for watching.