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Oral History Interview with Rajendra Srivastava: Growing SMU

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Growing SMU

Interviewee: Rajendra Srivastava

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 14 July 2015

Location: Singapore Management University, Li Ka Shing Library Recording Studio

Note to Reader:

Users of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. SMU does not exercise editorial control on the contents of the interview. We advise users to refer to the audio recording for the accurate/ authorised version of the interview.

Patricia Meyer:	I am Patricia Meyer and today is Tuesday, 14 of July, 2015. I will be speaking with RAJENDRA K. SRIVASTAVA for the conceptualizing SMU Oral History Project. We are meeting in the recording studio, the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University. The subject of the recording today is your role as provost and Deputy President of SMU. First I would like to just start by asking you to talk briefly about your career before you were involved with SMU.
Provost :	Well, just a little bit about my background. I am a graduate from the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur in mechanical engineering. I meandered into systems engineering at the University of Pittsburgh and I finished in the business school and the University of Texas at Austin hired me into the marketing group and I stayed at UT Austin for about 25 years until 2003. When I left UT Austin, I was a Senior Associate Dean and UT is a big school, the business school is almost as large as SMU as a whole. From there, I went to Emory University in Atlanta and I was no stranger to Singapore because I was doing some consulting and executive teaching for Hewlett Packard but I was really not aware of SMU till 2007. In 2007, SMU hosted a conference called "The Marketing Science Conference" and I attended that conference and I ran into Chin Tiong and I ran into, you know, other people as well. But that was my first association with SMU. Our president at that time, Woody Hunter, had been the former Provost at Emory University so he discovered me; however he discovered me, you'd have to ask him, but between him and Chin Tiong, they recruited me to come down and I came down in December 2007 to see what might be possible. And In July, 2008, I started as Provost at SMU.
Patricia Meyer:	Before we get into the details of what you did when you came here, could you just tell us about the role of a university provost?
Provost :	The provost is the Chief Academic Officer. The Provost is responsible for working with the President and shaping the academic strategy of the university. At the same time, if you want to look at it, if our business is education, one way to explain it to the lay community is that the Provost is the Chief Operating Officer for the education initiative. And so, I work with the Deans and the Deans report to the Provost Office. And the Provost works with the Deans to develop academic strategy, to work on the resource requirements, to make sure things get done sometimes, particularly at a place like SMU; we require collaboration across the schools. If we have, for example, there could be a major in Information Systems with a minor in Marketing, and that requires collaboration within schools. So it's not that the Deans can do that independently. So we need a mechanism by which we can facilitate that and that's another role that the Provost plays to help the schools achieve what they would like to achieve. So by and large, think of it as a Chief Academic Officer and a Chief Operating Officer.
Patricia Meyer:	Looking back to the early days of your appointment in 2008 when SMU was about half the age that it is now. What were your priorities in those early months?
Provost :	Well, some priorities were my own; some priorities were given to me. So for example, one priority was to get the AACSB accreditation. Another priority was to launch the executive MBA program which wasn't there at that time, and also the Post Graduate programs. My personal priority was that you cannot do any of these things

	<p>till you hire the right faculty. And admittedly that was also the priority from the board to see if SMU could ramp up the rate and you can't just ramp up the rate, you need to ramp up the quality as well. And so you know, hiring of faculty, you also have to make sure that the environment is there when you hire young faculty to make sure that there are adequate processes and resources for faculty development because it costs a lot of money to train the faculty and you don't want to lose them when they are almost ready but not quite ready for tenure. So we have to make sure that we not only hire the right people but we are able to bring them to the level where, you know, we can keep them. And so acquisition and retention of faculty was the key priority. Then it was also important to begin to start linking with other universities. My personal background is in marketing and within marketing, brand management. And so one way, in which we build the brand is to build awareness about SMU, but also to build up quality, but that quality is signaled by the quality of academic institutions you are partnered with. And so it was important to also partner with and learn from but also contribute towards because if you are going to partner with somebody, they want something in return. So it was really thinking through the strategy of how we are going to ramp up our Post Graduate Program, ramp up our reputation, while, at the same time, not losing sight of the Undergraduate Program, which was then about 98% of the enrolment, and it is still, 89-90% of the, I mean, the Undergraduate Program is still our core business but it was building sort of a superstructure on the foundation that was already laid by the very strong Undergraduate Program.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>During your time here, how did you want to see the Undergraduate Program further evolve?</p>
<p>Provost :</p>	<p>There were several components. I've always been a believer in the integration of theory and practice. So experiential learning is important, and also Singapore is an island nation with no hinterland. And therefore, global exposure is important because our graduates have to be able to do business across borders. And so those were the two important components, experiential learning and global exposure. The third element is really our world is getting more and more uncertain and the students are soon to be starting in jobs that may or may not exist five, ten years later. So we have to equip them with the ability to switch careers, switch into new opportunities that may arise. But fortunately, SMU was already doing it. When I got here, there were over 70% of the students had double major. So with double majors, what do we get? We get the flexibility of thinking across disciplines, and that flexibility of thinking actually prepares the students for change. I also wanted to make sure that in the educational effort, particularly if we think of experiential learning as important, that SMU has good corporate relations for internship so on and so forth. That was already in place. So many of the things with the Undergraduate program were simply strengthening the good work that was done under Tan Chin Tiong. And on the margins pushing things in terms of new content, one important thing to me is flexibility that the students have and the flexibility to take courses across the colleges and also the flexibility of going abroad. I am happy to say that as of now, 88% of our students have global exposure and our goal is to get to 100% within a year or two. And I don't think any university is close to where SMU is on global exposure. We have 100% of our students with experiential learning with internships. Nobody is</p>

	close to us. We take other things like I talked about double majors; many universities talk about it, but our students do it. So I am quite proud of what SMU has done.
Patricia Meyer:	Beside the Undergraduate education, you also oversee the Post Graduate education and I would like to just start by looking at Post Graduate Professional Programs. There's been this rapid growth in the number of programs and of enrolment. Could you just tell us about what's driving that growth and how are these different programs conceived?
Provost :	<p>The reality is that most companies when they are looking at somebody with 5 years of experience, they are not going to make them the general manager. They are looking for them, hiring them for very specific things, whether it is Sales and Marketing or it is as a Financial Analyst. And so what I found that we needed and what I think we need in Asia, and I think we need them in the West because what we started doing, now the Western universities are now copying, is what we call the specialized Masters. So it's a specialized Masters in Innovation Management, specialized Master in Corporate Communications, specialized Master of Information Technology and Business. So in the U.S you have a Masters of Information Systems and you have a Masters, let's say in Marketing. What the industry needs are Marketing people who know how to use Information Systems. So SMU has invested quite a bit in specialized Masters and that has added to our strength. So let's say when I came here we had about 4 or 5 Masters Programs, JD were already here. Maybe we had 6, I don't remember the exact numbers but now we have close to 20. By the end of 2008, I joined in July but by the end of 2008, we had graduated about 400 students in the Post Graduate Professional Programs. Since then, we had graduated 3000, so we scaled up almost nine, ten times. This year for graduation, for commencement, the number of Post Graduates is only slightly below the number of Undergraduates graduating.</p> <p>Anyways the number of postgraduates has increased very rapidly, but I am also delighted to say that our placement record has been very good and we just had some very very good feedbacks from Financial Times in addition to the ranking for the Masters in Wealth Management. They had indicated that SMU is one of the youngest universities to get ranked in the top 100 and I believe we came in at thirtieth or something but we moved in very quickly and my assumption is that because some of these rankings require at least three or four years of graduates with at least a certain number of graduates per year that within the next two or three years I expect many more of the SMU programs to be ranked globally.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	I want to just touch on executive development during your time here. How did you also oversee the change and growth in executive development?
Provost :	The executive program, the executive development programs are needed for primarily two things: one is, actually three things. One is of course to bring them more resources that we can then add to the faculty research and the PhD support pool. Second is it builds up a relationship between us and the corporate community and that relationship is quite instrumental in getting internship for our students, jobs for our students so that bridge is very important. And the third thing and perhaps I

	<p>am a minority in believing this, minority amongst faculty, is that I feel that it is absolutely necessary for faculty development. And the reason I feel it is necessary is that most of the disciplines at SMU, not just business, we take Law, it is a very professionally oriented discipline, or we take Information Systems, Information Technology, in all of these we need to know how to walk a talk, how if we have some ideas, how do we get them implemented. The second reason, the additional reason for faculty development is that I don't believe that all the knowledge that is there is between the ears of faculty in a university. I know some very very smart people in the business community who can dance circles around me. And so we need to be learning from them, we also need to understand that the rate at which information has been generated has been increasing every year. And as a consequence, when I was finishing my undergraduate, companies would hire you as a management trainee, they would train you for two years before you actually moved into a job function. Now they want students to be able to do that immediately. And so we don't have the luxury of sequential learning; that you learn academics and then you do experiential learning and then you actually do things. We need to integrate the two. For a variety of reasons, I really really see the need for closer collaboration between industry and academia and faculty develops so much better by working on real problems that need resolution. And when I look at my own research, the papers that are the most highly cited; their origins did not come from academic literature reviews. Their origins were looking at problems that industries said they needed some solutions to.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>The faculty, as you were saying, grew quite a bit during your time here. Just comments about how it was to hire, the challenges you face in hiring faculty and how you want to see faculty.</p>
<p>Provost :</p>	<p>Well the problem we were facing is the problem that any young school faces. Who are you and why should we bother to come there? I remember the first year I was out here I helped at least the Marketing group with recruiting and some of the other areas like management. What was happening is that people would sign up with SMU for an interview, and two days before the conference where we were interviewing them, they'd call and say, "Oh we have an opportunity to interview with some other company, can I reschedule my interview with SMU?" So we were on the dance card but sometimes people didn't want to dance with us. The situation now is very different. I think the reverse happens. People tell us that they don't have a spot open but they will create that spot to be able to interview with us. So the situation has flipped around. It's largely, not partly it's largely, because of what we have achieved on the research front. And so people know us today and they didn't know us earlier on. So some very very strong performances: econometrics and School of Accountancy, the research record of our faculty in that area, we're now consistently number of four, five, six in the world, not in Asia. Accountancy this year is ranked number eight I believe globally and number one in Asia in terms of academic research. Finance is number two. Management and Marketing, depending on the year we are looking at, are probably number three and four.</p>

Patricia Meyer:	I would like to turn to research. SMU was established as a research university. When you came, how did you want to see the research effort further developed?
Provost :	<p>The research effort has to be, of course, coming from the faculties. What I can do as provost and what the president can do is to encourage things that happened across schools. And so I cannot tell a senior member from economics that I know economics better than they do. But I can encourage them to cooperate with somebody from finance and work on issues that cut across disciplines. So my personal emphasis has been to encourage cross-disciplinary work. Fortunately, that's the same priority for the president Arnoud De Meyer, we both believe very very strongly in that. And consequently, there has been a tremendous amount of support from us on cross disciplinary programs. Beyond that, we have to encourage the schools to do the right things. Now one way of managing research is to spread the resources and say there are so many faculty members in this school, so many faculty members in that school, and we simply take the amount available and then divide it by the number of faculty and spread it around. That cannot be the case. What we have to do is that we have to make sure that we water those plants that are growing. And we occasionally have to trim things in order to make them grow better. There has been a strong focus on performance and I have stood behind the Deans that had been pushing the envelope and that has led to a situation where the schools cannot take things for granted and think they are going to get this money anyway. Now we have almost all the schools performing, you know, pretty well because the ground rules are not based on history and number. The ground rules are forward looking in terms of what they want to achieve and backward looking in terms of what they have achieved.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	There are a number of research institutes and centers at SMU and during your time, areas of excellence were also identified. Can you tell us about what is the area of excellence and why is that necessary in addition to, let's say institutes?
Provost :	<p>The areas of excellence, at least in my mind, different people will have different interpretation, but the reason I was pushing it out of my office is because I have always believed in research, education and practice. If you saw, that was the orientation in faculty, you know, we have three kinds of faculty. So to me, an area of excellence is where have thought leadership, meaning where we are one of the leaders in research on a topic, where we have recognized academic programs in that area, and where industry or government respects us enough to actively seek out our opinions on the topics. So to me, it's a three-way intersection: Do we know what we are talking about? Can we teach it well so that the world thinks that this is a leading academic program? And then is our opinion solicited? If I take some of the areas, one is financial markets and institutions; we are number two in Asia in Financial research. The Wealth Management program is number three but in terms of academic research, we are number two in Asia. And many of our faculty are invited to provide commentaries and financial performance of companies and so on and so forth. So that to me is an area of excellence. And then what we are trying to do within SMU's areas of excellence is to also look at these areas as they cut across the schools. So let's say within financial markets, I pick an area like mergers and acquisitions. Mergers and acquisitions is of course a financial issue. It is also a legal</p>

	<p>issue, regulatory. So we need faculty from School of Law. It is at the same time, a valuation issue; one company is buying another, therefore it's an accounting issue. It is an organizational behavior issue, because one company has to merge with and absorb another. It is a strategy issue. So this is an example of an area of excellence. And from my office, I have been encouraging, for example, the Center of Management Practice to put money in course development for a course that is jointly taught on mergers and acquisitions by four faculty members from four different schools. And it's a very expensive course but it's a very unique course. And that is the kind of course that is going to lead to unique differentiated output coming from Singapore Management University. Again the areas of excellence are multi-disciplinary and it is where we do our thinking, where we put it in the classroom. Another area is in Information Systems, where we have LARC as the center anchoring the activities in financial markets, it's going to be the Sim Kee Boon Institute. Another area is in the context of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, where IIE is the center. Then the School of Information Systems has started some additional initiatives, let's say in urban sustainability and that will develop into an area. And more recently, we looked at the financial health and wealth issues related to aging. So the aging area is also going to cut cross not only economics but school of social sciences and frankly also school of business. These areas of excellence are to really help integrate the schools and to taking advantage of the opportunity. It's there for everybody but because SMU is small and nimble I think we can do it faster and better.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Just want to touch on a couple more things. The case writing initiative, and you mentioned earlier the center of management practice. Could you tell us a little bit about how those got started?</p>
<p>Provost :</p>	<p>There're two reasons in my mind then there will be other reasons other people have. One is I remember our having a board meeting where we said that we need to improve our global profile. We had good faculty, good students but nobody knew about us. They thought about Singapore, they thought about Southern Methodist University in Dallas. So one was the global aspect. The other aspect was, in my personal belief, the balance between research, education and practice. The problem was that we had all kinds of research support available for tenured track faculty. We did nothing, absolutely nothing for research and education track faculty. So if in our mind, it was important to have a faculty member in the research track to be an editor or an area editor or at least on the editorial board, wouldn't it be good if we had practice track faculty who are on a corporate board. Were we providing tools for education track faculty to write cases and provide them support in those areas where we expected them to contribute? Were we sending them to an academic conference at AACSB or EFMD so they could learn the trick of the trade and how to manage academic programs? We weren't doing enough of that. So that were the motivator, those were the two motivators. It started out, really, with the case writing initiative because we have many colleagues from the west who would say, "Do you have a case on China Airlines or China Mobile?" or "Do you have a case on Tata Motors?" So they were asking us naturally, just as we asked our colleagues in Silicon Valley in Stanford to let us know about things peculiar to that part of the world. The idea became that if we could start sourcing cases on Asia, people were calling us</p>

	<p>anyway, that would help build our awareness, that is, SMU is doing this and SMU is doing that. It would also enhance our own faculty's knowledge about Asia because we were an Asian university. And that way we could contribute globally to knowledge if you will, articles, cases, etc. So the logic is that it would make us more visible to western universities and western corporations. What we found out is it also made us more visible to Eastern universities and Eastern corporations because you take a company like Unilever that has a strong presence in Singapore; they wanted cases for emerging markets. We did a program for them in Singapore. They liked it so much and we had, we were the ones who wrote the case so we had the regional insight and they then took that program into Four Acres London. So we started regionally with Unilever and now we've gone globally with Unilever. So it's turned out the benefit has been big for us in Asia as well because there's not that much content in our research article and case studies etc books that are sourced out of Asia. And so for every ten books and ten articles you can see coming out of the United States, there's not even one coming out of Asia. So we are happy to help in that effort.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>I want to ask briefly about the India desk and then I'd like to conclude</p>
<p>Provost :</p>	<p>Well the India Desk started because when we started thinking about SMU global positioning, Asia positioning, we felt we needed to have some insights into Asia so Arnoud took the China Desk and I took the India Desk. We made the mistake of not simultaneously starting the ASEAN Desk which we are now starting. So the idea was can we reach into the Indian corporates, the Indian academic institutions, and what can we learn from them and how can we contribute in that part of the world so we can then expect them to contribute to our initiatives. Examples of things that we did, we did the first crowdsourcing of case writing in India. We held a case writing workshop in Mumbai, and in collaboration with Tatas, and we invited 22 Tata managers and there were five faculty, six including me. And we took four case writers with us. And out of that one, two and a half day engagement, we wrote 6 cases on Tatas. So that reinforced the already strong bond that existed between SMU and Tatas. They were already taking our interns and so on and so forth so it was easier to sell them the case writing initiative. We partnered with the IITs, Indian Initiative of Technology in Kanpur which is where I graduated from. We already had an MOU in place with IIT Madras. We explored the relationships with Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore and Ahmedabad; now Calcutta is talking to us, IM Lucknow, the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in Delhi. The Indian collaborations are a little bit tougher, particularly with the top institutions because just as the Singapore government looks at SMU as an investment they have made, particularly for the undergraduate program, if I take the Indian Institute of Technology they look at the government's investment in IIT. And so it's harder to do undergraduate level collaborations, you know particularly with these institutions. It is getting easier to do postgraduate collaborations. We are also exploring things for example with Bombay Stock exchange, to see if we can use them as a point to connect with the industry. We are also talking not just with Tatas, we are talking with the Birla's and so on and so forth. We worked with CII, which is Confederation of Indian Industries. It's sort of a giant India wide chamber of commerce, if you want to think of it that way. And we use them to do programs, for example, in innovation. We are aligning, by the way, with our areas of excellence. So we did a program on Innovation Strategy in</p>

	<p>Mumbai, in collaboration with CII. And I was there. Some couple more faculty members were there. We beamed in Arnoud and one of our collaborators in the West, Peter Williamson. We brought them in through the satellite and CII helped us get senior level people from Ericsson India and so on and so forth. So it was a very good blend of academic and corporate thinking.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>To conclude, I would like to ask how has being part of SMU impacted you.</p>
Provost :	<p>I think SMU has given me the opportunity to grow. I don't think anywhere else in the world I would have had the opportunity to do such a mix of things. At one end, Center for Management Practice, starting a DBA program, getting a DBA program approved in 3 months. We are going to start it in October. Just tremendous opportunity to do new things and we've done things that other universities have not done. Although we started by looking at what other universities were doing. Many of the things we have done are kind of unique: our executive MBF program started out with a focus on Asia, not with a focus on the West. Now other universities are beginning to do that. So one is tremendous growth opportunity.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>Last question. Any advice for SMU students?</p>
Provost :	<p>Probably two or three. One is to keep moving because our world is changing and Singapore as they know today will not be the same Singapore in 5 years. Many of the opportunities that they will face will not be in Singapore. They maybe in Shanghai and they maybe in somewhere else. So one is to keep moving and looking forward. And the second one is going to be on flexibility and continued learning. Because of the rate of change in the society, I don't think the degree means anything in ten years from now. So that's one of the things we have been doing in SMU with dual majors and so on and so forth. I hope they're leaving with the ability to learn. So hopefully we'll get some of them to come back to SMU. And the third thing I would say is to, just as they've taken ownership at SMU, is to take ownership wherever they go. Whether it's with a company or an NGO or with the government, you have to invest in the organization, in the eco system that you work in. So your contributions are going to have to be beyond the job and beyond the family, it'd have to be to the community.</p>

