

The Making of Nova Southeastern University

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**A Tradition of Innovation,
1964–2014**

JULIAN M. PLEASANTS, PHD

Foreword by Ronald G. Assaf
Chairman, Nova Southeastern University Board of Trustees

Nova Southeastern University, Inc.
Fort Lauderdale-Davie

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Foreword

It gives me great satisfaction to write the foreword for Dr. Julian Pleasants's *The Making of Nova Southeastern University: A Tradition of Innovation, 1964–2014*.

My professional training was in business, and in 1968 I cofounded Sensormatic Electronics Corporation, expanded it into a New York Stock Exchange company, and in 2001 retired as its chairman of the board. I have had a lifetime commitment to education, having sent to college five of my children and six grandchildren (with more to come). I have established scholarships at three different universities and have served on two other university boards. I believe in the American dream, with education as the critical driving force in making the reality of that dream available to all. Education is a gift that keeps giving over a lifetime, provides opportunity in many directions, and changes lives for the better. After meeting with then board of trustees chair Ray Ferrero Jr., he convinced me that Nova Southeastern University (NSU) would be at the forefront of innovation in developing quality education and delivering education at a time and place not bound by walls, thus making a degree attainable for all potential students. It was an exciting new concept, and I wanted to be part of it.

Elected to the NSU Board of Trustees in 1994, I have served on each of the NSU board's numerous committees. I assumed the duties of chairman of the board in 2005, and I am proud to have been a small part of the tremendous growth the university has enjoyed over these past eleven years.

Distinguished scholar Dr. Julian M. Pleasants is professor emeritus of history at the University of Florida (UF), where he taught for thirty-nine years. Pleasants served as director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at UF from 1996 to 2008. He taught more than 11,000 students in his career at UF and was the recipient of more than a dozen teaching awards. He was chosen for inclusion in *Who's Who Among American Teachers*, *Who's Who in America*, and *Who's Who in the World*. He is the author and editor of eight books and numerous articles in various publications. His books about Florida include *Hanging Chads: The Inside Story of the 2000 Presidential Recount in Florida* (2004), *Orange Journalism: Voices from Florida Newspapers* (2003), *Gator Tales: An Oral History of the University of Florida* (2006), and *Seminole Voices: Reflections on Their Changing Society, 1970–2000* (2010) (with Harry A. Kersey). In 2010, the Florida Humanities Council awarded him the silver medal for nonfiction for his book on the Seminoles.

In 2014, NSU will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. The State of Florida chartered NSU (then called Nova University of Advanced Technology) in December 1964, when its only office was a storefront on Las Olas Boulevard. NSU's history is one of a series of difficulties and hard-won successes. As this book explains, in the early years the university often struggled for its financial life and survival as an institution. NSU has come a long way since 1964.

The administrative leadership of an organization has two options in the approach to its managerial responsibilities: one is maintaining the system the way it is, and the other is changing the system so that it performs more efficiently and serves its client in a more accountable way. As Dr. Pleasants makes clear in his discourse on the university history, the latter was the NSU way.

There was a popular saying among NSU administrators that “you cannot spell innovate without using the word Nova.” Dr. Pleasants illustrates this point by identifying the following themes as common threads throughout the book: a spirit of innovation, an unrelenting entrepreneurial drive, and a tenacity to succeed despite financial adversity. These attitudes and other factors enabled NSU to rise from humble beginnings to become one of the largest and most successful not-for-profit independent universities in the country. To have accomplished this feat in less than fifty years is, to say the least, extraordinary. In fact, many would describe NSU's evolution from a relatively unknown local institution to a worldwide multidimensional university as revolutionary.

The rewards of reading this book are many—and often surprising. The reader’s natural curiosity about how NSU got started, which initial colleges were established, and what courses were taught is satisfied, but the book offers much more. Those interested in other topics, such as university personalities, governing bodies, presidents past and current, campus construction, athletics, diversity, international programs, and community outreach, will have their questions answered as well.

Several pivotal events are noted throughout the book. Perhaps most important was the timely merger with New York Institute of Technology. The eventual breakup with this institution due to incompatible goals enabled NSU to pursue its goal as an independent institution. Other significant events include the loss of the research vessel *Gulf Stream* and its crew, the establishment of the law school, the relocation of the Germ-Free Life Research Center from Tampa to the main campus, the innovative programs developed at the University School, the partnership with the Miami Dolphins, the establishing of a private/public joint-use library (the largest library in Florida at the time of this writing), and the important and successful merger with Southeastern University of the Health Sciences.

The early years at NSU were characterized by periods of major organizational changes and educational program reforms. This book describes these changes in detail and their implications for NSU’s future. Initially, the university was heavily involved in programs such as science education, ocean sciences, behavioral sciences, and cancer research. This focus has since been expanded to include new offerings in law, business, computer science, psychology, medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, optometry, nursing, physical and family therapy, and allied health. Many of these programs are multidisciplinary in nature.

One of the core principles at NSU is that higher education should not be bound by time or place; instead, it should be an avenue to provide an increasing number of options for students in pursuit of their academic goals. Parallel to this basic philosophy is the view that the traditional classroom approach to education held many aspects that were inefficient for both teachers and students. Education is always an individual experience. The early visionaries felt that in future years, it would be possible to earn an ever-increasing number of credits toward obtaining one’s degree on-site, off campus, or in an online classroom environment. Institutions must create a culture that values change.

As one might expect, when these innovative ideas were adopted, other colleges and universities initially opposed the new teaching

techniques, and NSU was attacked, criticized, and hampered by a series of lawsuits. Vindication would come in later years, as many of the country's most prestigious universities have implemented a similar approach to teaching. Perhaps this, more than any other event, is evidence of NSU's singular influence in curricular and delivery systems in higher education. As Dr. Pleasants states, "Nova University, which began with the goal of becoming the MIT of the South, now has the satisfaction of seeing one of the best institutions in the country [MIT] adopt the format of off-campus online education that [Nova] pioneered in 1974."

Readers of these pages will learn about innovation and tradition at a very unique academic institution during its formative and later years. The reader, mainly through oral history interviews, will garner insights into the men and women who accomplished this feat, their successes and failures, and their ultimate triumph.

Meticulously researched and written in a straightforward, easy to read style, Dr. Pleasants has given us a thoughtful, balanced, well-written history which will broaden our understanding of what took place during NSU's first 50 years. In addition, all nine chapters have readily free-flowing text, firsthand accounts, biographical data, and illustrative photographs.

What has been accomplished in fifty years is nothing short of remarkable, and only the imagination can tell how great this university can be over the next fifty years.

Ronald G. Assaf
Chairman, Nova Southeastern University Board of Trustees

Preface

I first became involved with Nova Southeastern University (NSU) when Lydia Acosta, vice president for information services and university librarian, called to ask if I would conduct some oral history interviews with the current and former presidents of the university and with some of the founding fathers. I did research on the university's history and found that it had a fascinating past. Several times during its formative years, Nova University of Advanced Technology—the school's original name—had almost gone bankrupt and narrowly avoided closing its doors for good. When I first visited the campus in 2009, I was impressed with the extraordinary progress that Nova Southeastern University made in its less than fifty years of existence. Today, the university has a law school, a medical school, an attractive campus with a student body of some 27,000 students, and an annual budget of \$600 million. Nova's evolution began in 1961 with the long-range vision of a group of local businessmen who called themselves the Oatmeal Club. Thus, when Lydia asked me to write a history of NSU, I readily agreed.

I interviewed some thirty individuals, including all of the living presidents, who were part of the founding and development of the university. The administration and staff members of the NSU Archives at the Alvin Sherman Library suggested most of the interviewees. I could have interviewed other important people in NSU's history, but time and funding was a factor, so we selected those who we thought would give us the best chance to discover the details behind the school's success. I am deeply indebted to those who took the time to

sit for an interview, and I am grateful for the knowledge and wisdom they imparted.

Dr. Richard Dodge, Dr. Jerry Chermak, Dr. Arnold Melnick, Dr. Brad Williams, John Santulli, Jamie Mayersohn, and Professor Ron Brown were gracious enough to review the section of the book that related to their experiences and saved me from a number of errors.

It is important to note that discrepancies, inaccuracies, and distortions often occur in any oral history. The human memory is not perfect and is often flawed when retracing events that happened many years ago. Other versions of the same event might differ in several specifics from the oral history interviews used in this volume. In a few interviews, some recollections have been clearly disputed by the facts. One member of the board of trustees, for example, remembered that he had voted for a certain merger when the minutes of the board clearly showed that he voted against it.

Each person brings his/her own values and background (gender, age, race, religion, experience) to the interview, and what one person thinks is important, another person might dismiss out of hand. As with a traffic accident viewed by three different people, there are always conflicting and differing views of the same event. I have tried to look at official documents and any other factual material to determine the accuracy of oral presentations. Often there was no supporting evidence and I had to take a person's view as his/her truth. There are serious gaps in the official record, especially in the early years. On some occasions I had to assume facts not in evidence and make the most appropriate conclusions possible without all the necessary information. Frequently, several accounts taken as a whole provided a basic understanding of what happened, and I have tried to accommodate all of the differing opinions as best I could. Nonetheless, these oral history interviews play an important part in understanding the history of the school—these “spoken memories” provide insight into how and why decisions were made, how certain individuals influenced the evolution of the institution, and what events were most significant in the fifty-year history of NSU. In addition, oral histories can provide powerful and evocative accounts of events from people who experienced them firsthand. The NSU interviews personalize events and elicit information lacking in university documents, newspapers, and other more formal sources.

While much of the information on which this book is based came from oral history interviews, the majority of the factual material was gleaned from sources in the NSU Archives. These sources included of-

ficial documents, such as the minutes of the South Florida Education Center (SFEC) and the Nova Southeastern University Board of Trustees, presidential papers, newspapers and periodicals, university publications and press releases, and outside historical accounts of events in Broward County.

As one might expect, the information obtained from these university sources is uniformly positive in its treatment of the university. Some of the material is outright propaganda, which is part of the responsibility of any publicity office—to make the institution look good. Even the local newspapers, with some exceptions, have reported favorably on NSU. Nonetheless, I have attempted to present an unbiased view of the history of the university, warts and all.

When writing this history on Nova Southeastern University, as is the case with any institution, there was a lack of sufficient and verifiable factual information in the NSU Archives and other sources to support conclusions about specific issues, such as NSU's financial activities, land acquisition, and the designation of money for certain projects. Without all of the necessary information, one had to draw conclusions based to some degree on conjecture.

I have attempted to footnote each reference of importance, but have taken the liberty of putting several sources in one footnote at the end of a lengthy discussion of an issue or event rather than overwhelm the reader with hundreds of separate footnotes. This practice may create some confusion about exactly where one quotation came from, but all of the collective footnotes relate to the subject at hand.

This book is not meant to be a complete academic history of Nova Southeastern University. Rather it is an informal compendium of facts, events, reminiscences, and stories. In writing a history of NSU, I have attempted to enliven facts with personal recollections of faculty, administrators, staff, supporters, and students. I have focused on some of the more interesting situations rather than provide a boring recitation of facts. There have been so many events and personalities in the history of NSU that it would require three volumes to cover all the details of the university's history. The aim of this book is to enable readers, through a tapestry of various events and key personalities, to understand the evolution of NSU from an institution that was barely viable in the 1960s to a thriving and successful university in 2014. Any choice one makes about source materials will necessarily omit some facts that another observer would insist on including. Hopefully, this mix of recollections, official documents, and newspapers will cover all the historical highlights, while explaining how

each university president influenced the school and how the academic programs and social activities have changed over the years.

The manuscript could never have been completed without the assistance and support of many people. President George Hanbury endorsed the project and was available with suggestions and recommendations for the manuscript. Frank DePiano, provost and executive vice president for academic affairs, first proposed the idea for a history of NSU and fully supported the project with funding and wise counsel. Lydia Acosta functioned as my liaison with NSU from the beginning. Lydia was very generous with her time and advice during the entire project. Harriett MacDougall, executive director of the Alvin Sherman Library, helped in the review and editing process and supplied valuable information on the construction of the library.

The manuscript could never have been completed in such a short time without the superb assistance from the staff of the NSU Archives in the Alvin Sherman Library. First and foremost, Robert Bogorff, director of the NSU Archives, is a walking encyclopedia of the history of the university. He came to the campus in 1971 and knows most of the players and events during the school's history. He has a deep and sound knowledge of the various collections, and his support and advocacy were invaluable. Cheryl Peltier-Davis, a published author and librarian par excellence, aided the process tremendously with her expertise in technical matters, research, and writing. She accessed fugitive bits of information from the archives with accuracy and dispatch. Cathy Elios, the Archives coordinator, was enormously helpful with a myriad of activities, from obtaining information from university sources to securing necessary material to support the writing of the book. Her advice, as was the case with all of the aforementioned, was almost always on target. Allison Durland, who worked as the student assistant, is a master of the Internet and helped all of us get the information we needed. Piya Chayanuwat, director of library computing services, was both brilliant and patient in helping this technologically challenged writer with computer problems. For readers wishing for more information on NSU history, please contact NSU Archives by visiting <http://www.nova.edu/archives/> or calling (954) 262-4642.

I am grateful to the staff of the University Press of Florida; Meredith Morris-Babb, director; Dennis Lloyd, deputy director; Lynn Werts, associate director; and Iris Sutcliffe, copy editor. Their professional expertise has improved the quality of the book and made the entire process much easier.

The help and support of everyone mentioned was valuable, but I alone am responsible for the interpretation, the factual presentation, and the conclusions in this book. Any mistakes and errors are my responsibility.

Julian M. Pleasants
February 19, 2013

