Oral History Interview of Kenneth Garni

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Interview Summary

Ken Garni, professor emeritus of psychology and former director of Suffolk University’s Counseling Center, reflects on the growth and development of the center during his forty years at Suffolk. Garni describes his department’s early role as one of the only student support centers on campus and how, over time, specialized departments such as the Ballotti Learning Center and the Career Center were created to provide comprehensive support for students. He discusses the challenges of adapting services and staffing to meet the evolving needs of students as the university grew and the population diversified. Among his accomplishments, he notes the creation of the American Psychological Association (APA) accredited doctoral intern training program, his role in creating the Ballotti Learning Center, and advocating for the first international student advisor position.

Throughout the interview, he reflects on how his career was positively impacted by his Suffolk colleagues and his collaborations with campus partners such as the Student Affairs Division.

Subject Headings

Garni, Kenneth

Suffolk University – History
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

NANCY STOLL: Ken.

KEN GARNI: Hi. Can you see me?

NANCY STOLL: I can see you, yes.

KEN GARNI: Good.

NANCY STOLL: Let’s begin. I'm Nancy Stoll, dean of students emerita at Suffolk University. This is an oral history interview with Dr. Ken Garni, professor emeritus and former director of the Counseling Center at Suffolk University. This interview is taking place through Zoom on Thursday, October 15th, 2020.

So, Ken, let’s start with the basics. What years did you work at Suffolk?

[00:00:35]

KEN GARNI: Well, I started in Suffolk in 1969, straight out of my doctoral studies at BU [Boston University]. My intent, at that point, was to stay there for two or three years, until I finished my dissertation, and then get a real job. Forty years later, I must have been a slow learner, I retired in 2009, after being the director of the Counseling Center for 37 of those 40 years.

NANCY STOLL: What titles did you have during those years?

KEN GARNI: I started as an assistant professor of psychological services, and worked my way up to chair and professor of the department of Psych Services. At the same time, I became the director of the Counseling Center in 1972. So, I had both of those titles very early in my career.
NANCY STOLL: Okay. And talk about how you came to be the director of Counseling.

[00:01:46]
KEN GARNI: Over the forty years—My job, at the beginning, had no relevance to my job at the end. It changed radically. Much of that may have been the fact that, when I became the director in 1972, I probably was the greenest and most inexperienced director in the country at that point. By the time I left, forty years later, at least in terms of years of service, I probably was the most experienced director. So, it was a big shift for me.

But back then, counseling centers were sort of an anomaly. They were rarely used by students. And if they were, they were mostly career-oriented, psychological testing, career testing, guidance, but very little mental health or direct clinical psychology. Students at that point rarely, if ever, had been in a counseling center or sought any kind of mental health services prior to coming to the universities. Students then were very different than they are now, mostly first-generation parents, blue collar, working class. Students at Suffolk were pretty homogeneous, white, Catholic, all commuters. So, their access to the Counseling Center was limited.

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By the time I retired, counseling centers were providing very comprehensive clinical services. Rarely were they doing any guidance, or testing, or career services. Aligned with psychiatric services, a lot of referrals off campus. Students, many, many students who came to the services had had prior mental health services. They were no longer first-generation college students. They came from all over the country with a significant contingent from international countries. So, both the use of services and the clientele that used them were radically different from the early—or the late ‘60s to early 2000.

NANCY STOLL: How did you get picked to take on this role? The person who started the Psychological Services, well I don’t recall the name of the person. But how did that get passed from him to you?
KEN GARNI: Nancy, I've been retired for ten years. I'm still trying to figure out how, in the first place, I got the job, and then how, after being on the job for three years, I ended up being the director. I went for the initial interview at the behest of my dissertation advisor, who said it would be a good idea for me to sort of test out how you interview for a job, because the job required that you have the doctorate in hand. I did not have it. I kept getting invited back for subsequent interviews until finally, I was offered the job.

[00:05:04]
The first decision I made when I was hired was to ask my new boss, his name was Leo Lieberman, if I could start my job a week late because I was going to be on my honeymoon. I got off to a real delayed start there. The department was relatively new, in the sense that it had been joined with the Department of Psychology. And then an APA onsite evaluation suggested that they split. The department had become very large and unwieldy. And they had a lot of teaching psychologists, and then some clinical psychologists. And they split them into (a) the Department of Psychology and then the Department of Psychological Services.

My boss retired after four or five years. And there were very few people in the department who were eligible. Because at that point, I had gotten my degree. And I ended up the director. I’m still trying to figure out who made that decision. But I'm very grateful they did.

NANCY STOLL: Well, as you indicated, the beginnings of the Counseling Center were as an extension of the Psychology Department. And then, it became a standalone department in the College of Arts & Sciences and Psychological Services. Can you talk about that structure, and the advantages and disadvantages of that?

[00:06:34]
KEN GARNI: It was a very, very unusual structure, in the sense that because the Department of Psych Services had originally been aligned with the department or had been
within the Department of Psychology, members of the Department of Psych Services maintained their faculty status. My boss, at that time, was the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, where the department was originally housed. So that gave us some faculty cache that most counseling centers did not have. They were part of student services. Very few, if any, had faculty rank.

[00:07:15]
It allowed the center to get a pretty good start, in terms of having faculty recognition, and to be able to be more aligned, I think, with the academic mission of the university, rather than a sort of tangential student services, at that point. As long as I was the director, we still retained faculty rank. Although, as you well know, I worked probably closest with you than I did with the dean of the college because we were integrated more effectively in the student service side of the university.

NANCY STOLL:  What are your most vivid memories of those early days at Suffolk? Not so much the work that you did, but just the general environment and experience?

[00:08:03]
KEN GARNI:  My first day at Suffolk was probably the most traumatic day for me, in the sense that I had—I was in my office for about an hour, and I was trying to sort of set things up, and get the lay of the land, when Suffolk University police escorted, quite ungently, a student into my office, and said, “Take care of him.” I tried to do that, even though the student was obviously not happy to be in my office and saw me as part of the enemy.

It wasn’t very long after that, that the Boston police barged into my office and arrested him. I found out later that this young man had had a history of acting out behaviors, and had been sent to my office, because he was acting out in a cafeteria. [He] ended up going to jail, and being removed from the university. He was probably, even though I only had a 20-minute interaction with him, the most disturbed student I saw in all the forty years I was there. So that was my start. Everything went downhill from there, or maybe uphill.
But in the first, probably five years of my being the director, I spent a lot of time and energy, and had my staff trying to make themselves present on the campus. I think, in many ways, counseling centers, at that point, were sort of afterthoughts. You used them for testing. You used them for career-related work. And I was trying to make the Counseling Center at least more visible, so it was more of a resource for faculty members who were seeing students in their classes who were having difficulties.

[00:09:55]
A lot of my first five or six years were spent doing outreach, meeting with faculty members, meeting with non-faculty members, talking to administrators about what we as a Counseling Center could do on the campus. So probably the first third of my career there was trying to make the Counseling Center more visible. The second-third was sort of making it effective, in terms of the visibility. And the last third was trying to hide from the service, because—or trying to hide from people coming to service, because we were overwhelmed, as many counseling centers had become in the last twenty years.

NANCY STOLL: Most of us who spent our professional lives at Suffolk had people who influenced us during those years. I'm wondering who were the people who had an impact on your professional development when you were at Suffolk?

[00:10:50]
KEN GARNI: Yeah, I struggle with that question because there were so many. So, you know, I would be remiss if I said one or two. I think working at Suffolk in the first—in the ‘70s and early ‘80s, for me, it was more of a collaborative working space. You know, departments weren't as specialized. There weren't as many non-faculty positions on campus. You worked collaboratively or cooperatively with many, many people. The lines of demarcation were much more blurred than they were by the time I retired. There were a lot of people I interacted with, in many, many academic and nonacademic departments, that influenced me.
Of course, I was so inexperienced at the start, that almost anyone who said anything meaningful influenced me. But I learned a lot from members of the Psychology Department who were very helpful, some senior faculty in the Education Department, who reached out to me. So, there were a lot of people who I think understood that I needed a lot of encouragement and a lot of support. And they were there.

[00:12:03]
I would be remiss if I said any one person. I mean I worked—I think Glen Eskedal in the Department of Education, and Don Unger, who was his predecessor, were both very helpful to me. Glen worked with me in the department for a few years before he moved to being the director or the chair of the Education Department. But the deans were very helpful. Even the presidents, at times, were very helpful. And, of course, later on, yours truly was quite helpful, as I shifted, or was asked to shift the department in another direction.

NANCY STOLL: Let’s go back to 1981, when you chaired the IACS Committee that revised the guidelines of the university’s Counseling Services. Our audience would know, that IACS is the International Association of Counseling Services. Those guidelines, I think, it referred to the ones developed in the 1970s. But in 1981, you were chairing the group that was reviewing those and updating them. How did that professional experience impact your work at Suffolk?

[00:13:12]
KEN GARNI: Significantly. I think I, as I said, was trying to figure out how to manage a Counseling Center in the early ‘70s. And I turned to IACS requesting that they do a site visit for purposes of accreditation. Not so much that I thought we were accreditable, but because it would help me understand how to balance services, and what the priorities should be in an accredited Counseling Center.

Much to my pleasant surprise, we were accredited in 1975. And I was aware of how influential IACS was for most counseling centers at that point, because that was the only
Oral History Interview of Kenneth Garni (SOH-054)

accrediting body it had for the service delivery of centers. At one point I became a regional accreditor. I did site visits for them. And I worked my way up to the point where, years later, I became the president of IACS and the chair of their Accrediting Board.

[00:14:13]
But I think what it did, was bring me outside of Suffolk and put Suffolk in a—in my mind, where it belonged, in terms of how it related to other centers, what other centers were doing, what other urban counseling centers were doing. Because, as similar as many centers were, each individual center had some unique qualities. And in our case, although 1980 was still a little early for that, it was an urban commuter institution. And that meant that the role of the Center on that kind of campus was different than the role of a center on a residential campus.

So, I sort of interfaced with a lot of—with other centers that were in urban settings, that had mostly commuter students. And I learned a lot from those collegial cooperations. I was always a member of IACS. The Center is still, you know, 45 years in, still IACS-accredited. It was very important, in terms of broadening my perspective about what a Center is and how it can develop into different modes.

NANCY STOLL: In addition to IACS, were there other involvements outside of Suffolk that influenced your work?

KEN GARNI: I'm sorry?

NANCY STOLL: In addition to IACS, were there other involvements outside of Suffolk that influenced your work?

[00:15:42]
KEN GARNI: Yeah. The International—The Association of University College Counseling Center Directors had its own association. I was obviously a member of that. And over time, also became the president of that association. So that was where I mostly
broadened my perspective. Not so much in terms of service, but the role of the Counseling Center Director on the campus, and the relationship between the director and other key figures on those campuses. And it was very helpful in understanding that you needed to individualize your interactions with leaders on campus. But there were some key factors that led to directors being able to do that. Again, the fact that we were faculty members made it easier for me to interact with department chairs in academic departments, and even the deans in both the business school and the law school, as well as my own boss.

NANCY STOLL: Back at Suffolk, you were involved, or assumed the leadership role in a number of areas outside of the job of leading the Counseling Center. And much of this was driven by the change in the makeup of the student body at the time. I have a three-part question. First, how did the diversification of the student body impact the Counseling Center?

[00:17:12]

KEN GARNI: In many, many ways. I mean they were diversified, in terms of gender, because originally, the great majority of students were white male students. The international students, I mean I think the diversification of the student body also led to the diversification of requests for services. And where it was much easier to provide sort of homogeneous services to a homogeneous population, we had to learn how to offer the services we had in different ways, to different students. We couldn’t offer the services the same way.

We had to do outreach to students; more active, more forceful outreach to students who were more reticent to use our services. In some cases, students whose cultures made it very difficult for them to access clinical services. In some cases, a student would feel that they were disowning or being disowned by their families if they sought services from other than a family member or a religious leader.

[00:18:26]
We learned how to deal differentially with foreign students. We learned how to provide outreach services to minority students. You know, obviously, when we had residential students, it was easier for us to reach out to them in their places of residence. So, we found more neutral sites for students to be. We met on the Boston Common at times with students who were reticent to come to the Center. We would go for walks with some students who didn’t want to be seen coming into the Center. We had to be much more creative and imaginative, in terms of how we developed, and then provided the services that we were comfortable with.

NANCY STOLL: My second part of my question is specific to the fact that you were instrumental in the creation of the Learning Center, which I think was around 1981. Can you talk about that?

KEN GARNI: Would you say that again?

NANCY STOLL: You were instrumental in the creation of the Learning Center in 1981. Can you talk about that? I think you were involved in writing a grant for the funding for it.

[00:19:39]

KEN GARNI: When you're around as long as I am, you're generally involved with a lot of creation. But the Learning Center, it was very clear that there were students who were coming to the university who were ill-prepared to transfer from high school to college and then deal with college-level work. And it became clear, he Counseling Center, at that point, was dealing with not only with tremendous influx of students who had clinical needs, or counseling needs, we also had lots of students who had career needs and career service needs. And then we had the students who were coming in with academic needs.

[00:20:23]

And it became clear that the Center could not do all three. So, we worked with other academicians in the university to—Again, this is one of those things where being part of a Counseling Center Association and IACS, IACS is very, very clear that career services and
learning services should be separate and distinct from counseling services, that they were related, but they were still distinct enough and needed special services. So, we worked together with, again, a variety of academic professionals who felt students were ill prepared for their classes and with administrative support from all three schools, were able to develop a Center that stood alone and provide all those services related to academic work.

[00:21:22]
Ultimately, the same thing happened, as you know, with Career Services, that became independent of the Counseling Center. So that each of the needs was handled in standalone, independent ways, which, I think, better suited the individual students’ needs. And it allowed the students to separate out parts of their issues from others, and get services for all of them.

NANCY STOLL: Right, right. And the third part of my question is to have you describe your involvement in the development services for international students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students.

KEN GARNI: Well again, you know, as the students became more diverse, you have to—no, you don’t have to remember, you know that one of the sort of mantras at Suffolk is doing more with less. It has always been that way, and we succeeded as a result of it, to some degree. So as the students became different and required different needs and different access to the Counseling Center, we did everything we could to mirror that in terms of who we hired, and the services we provided. And we added as much as we could, in terms of adding faculty, and then becoming a clinical training site for doctoral students through APA.

[00:22:53]
We were able to diversify the staff that was presenting issues, or presenting services to those students. But again, it became clear that those students were better served in standalone programs. I was members of multiple committees and taskforces that—I mean I
would advocate for the needs of these students with key faculty and administrators on
campus, and probably did it to the point where they would respond to me like, “Oh, here
he comes again. Let’s see if we can get away from him by doing what he wants.” I was
pretty perseverant with students who I felt the Center could not help, to the degree that
they needed it.

We had members of my staff that were LGBT. We had members of the staff that were
minority. But a lot of those were part-time. They were short-termers. And I couldn’t
guarantee those services would be held over time. So again, it was much like the Career
Services, much like [the] Learning Center. I don’t want to use the word “shuffling,” but
moving special service needs to other areas of the University that could better serve them;
and, in many respects, your organization, Student Services, blossomed and grew at that
point, as much as we had. And were able to provide a lot of the services that allowed us
then to focus on what our primary service was, and allowed us then to refer on campus for
students with special needs. And then we developed resources off campus for those same
students. I think the students were certainly much better served as a result of that splitting
off of services.

NANCY STOLL: I know that you had lobbied for an actual staff position with
international students. That was just—That was in the late ‘80s. And as I was coming
onboard, that position was being filled. And I think you had managed to make that happen,
as I recall. And the international student advisor actually started out reporting to you and
then was shifted to me? Is that your memory?

[00:25:26]

KEN GARNI: That is true. I think international students were referred to the Counseling
Center by faculty members who were aware that they were experiencing both transitional
problems to academic life in the United States, but also were having all sorts of social and
academic problems as a result of it. It was one of those situations where they were all being
referred to the Counseling Center because we were the only sort of game in town. And it
became clear to me that, once again, we didn’t have the resources—or the resources we had weren’t adept enough to focus on those types of students.

[00:26:16]
I was able to hire a part-time graduate student. Don’t ask me where she came from. But she was a member of our staff. Her sole responsibility was to do outreach and to provide support services for international students. She became an international student advisor in the Counseling Center under my supervision. And she did a very good job sort of making—And one of the things that she learned, and she brought to us, was the importance of using group services for international students. But that became complicated, because a group of international students is not like a group of American students, because they have all sorts of cultural issues, and class, and race, and issues.

[00:27:10]
And we sometimes made some very ill-informed decisions about thinking that if you just put ten international students in a group together, we can help them sort of socialize with each other, when it became clear that some of those international students could not find themselves a space in that room because other international students from other countries, or other parts of their country, were in the same room. So, we slowly learned that we needed to be much more discreet about using those services. But it started the process, again, of standalone services for special population identified as at-need, but in a different need.

NANCY STOLL: And Doris Clausen then became the first full-time international student advisor.

[00:27:59]
KEN GARNI: She was the first full-time international student advisor. I think you and I shared her for a while.
NANCY STOLL: Right, in the beginning I think. And then she moved under my division.

KEN GARNI: Yeah. And I think, again, she—You know, it was one of those developmental issues, where we went from identifying a problem, doing more with less, as long as we could. And then, eventually, key people on the campus understand that, in some cases, doing more with less wasn’t the way to go. And where you and I were able to advocate for movement from a sort of a part-time to a fulltime. And then, you know, build around that individual, so that those students got the services they deserved.

NANCY STOLL: There was somewhat of a similar progression in terms of students with disabilities, where that had then fallen into the Learning Center and the Counseling Center. It was sort of betwixt and between. As we had more students that were presenting disability issues, I remember that the significant ADA reviews that we did—should we talk about the university’s legal compliance? But that had a progression to a point where there was a specified Disability Services Office, with staff that served those needs. But that developed over time.

[00:29:38]

KEN GARNI: Yeah, I think it mirrors how the special needs for special student programs were developed. I mean I hadn't really thought about it. But there is a pattern for all of those now existing services, how they got to where they are. And I think it was much easier to provide services in my younger days, because the services, the needs were from homogeneous students for homogeneous services. And then, as we succeeded in making the Counseling Center more visible and more viable on campus, the need—there was a broadening of needs. There was a change in the University procedure, in terms of how they admitted students, and where the students were coming from.

And it became clear to me, quite early, that we were going to be overwhelming with (a) the number of requests for services, but also the uniqueness of those—the broadening of the service needs. So, I think the first sort of model was the International Student Office, how
that developed. And then, that worked well. So subsequent changes, I think emanated from that.

[00:31:00]
And looking back at it, I was able to move a lot of the services that we were not adept or qualified or competent to deal with, over to you, so you could deal with them. And they were better served that way, because then we were able to build up individual services for those students.

NANCY STOLL: Right. Right. In addition to the incredible increase in diversity in the student body, Suffolk went through enormous changes in the forty years you were there. I'm wondering, what are some of the changes that you experienced, that particularly impacted your work, beyond just the diversification of the student body?

[00:31:40]
KEN GARNI: Residential students, residential students, residential students. [laughter] You know, any more? Well, that essentially changed our job from a nine-to-five, five-day-a-week job to a 24/7, seven-day-a-week job. I think it changed the way we—Well, in some ways, as I mentioned earlier, the first part of my career was trying to get us visible, trying to do outreach. When you had the residential students, that also overtaxed our system. Because the more outreach we did in the residential halls, the more we pulled students in, which was good. But then it also put an onus on how we managed those students.

I never worried about counseling limits for students for the first maybe twenty years of my being a director. The last ten years, we tried to move towards session limits, referrals outside, making much more comprehensive sort of assessments before we took on students because the service wasn’t equipped to deal with the volume. And I think the residential life program, the administrators in those programs are very good at identifying problems, either preventatively or at the outset of the development. We've got many, many more referrals through those programs.
Another impact on our service was the increasing relationship with the law school. I think law students, early in my career there, were loath to seek services, because they felt it would be a downer on their careers. No one wanted to know that they were having to access mental health services. I think as the law school became more competitive and more demanding, and worked its way to being a more gender—had more female students there, the relationship between the female students and the male students on the campus became ultra-competitive, and led to all sorts of interactive, interpersonal social problems.

So those students started to use the Counseling Center more frequently as well. And those students came to us with, at times, significantly prior mental health histories. So that put an emphasis—much more emphasis on how we allocated our services. I would say the last part of my career, it was trying to balance the needs with the ability to provide the services. Early career was trying to develop the needs and match them with the services we had plenty of at that time.

**NANCY STOLL:** You referenced a little while ago the fact that the Counseling Center was approved as an APA training site for doctoral interns. When did that happen? What was the date on that?

**KEN GARNI:** That was in the ‘80s as well, middle to late ‘80s. And part of it was driven by the fact that we felt that we were providing the services that made us eligible for becoming a doctoral training site. The issue there for us was, if we could attract doctoral interns from other sites, other training schools, that we could both increase the service, but also increase the scope of the services we provide. So, we went through with the accreditation, the same—very similar to the IACS accreditation. And fortunately, we were accredited. And then, of course, that brought the Center into competition with other centers for training personnel. We had to go up against all the other APA approved counseling centers for doctoral students who were seeking training sites.
And we were very lucky and successful over the years, in bringing in some very, very qualified and experienced doctoral candidates who we were able to pick doctoral candidates who extended our services into some of the categories that we’ve been talking about. Some of them were minorities, some of them were international students. We had students who had been training in the LBGT model. We were able to use the training program to broaden the scope of our services.

In most cases, those students were much more well skilled and trained in doing outreach than my staff members who had been on campus for many, many years. So, we just unleashed them on the community, did all sorts of good things for the community, and then also amplified the problem we were having, in terms of bringing students back into the Counseling Center with them. It was a two-edged sword for us, but one that I think made us all feel more professional because training was part of our model. And, we were all taking on that role with some very, very experienced and qualified trainees.

NANCY STOLL: How many interns did the Center train over your years at Suffolk?

KEN GARNI: How many? Well, by the time I retired in 2009, we were training—25 years? – so probably 75 or so doctoral candidates. We had three a year, two a year on years where we decided not to go with three. So, 60 to 75 [doctoral students].

NANCY STOLL: So that was a significant impact on the—

KEN GARNI: I'm sorry?

NANCY STOLL: That created a significant impact for future career decisions for these students who might become directors themselves.
KEN GARNI: Oh, I don’t know that they were coming to the Counseling Center to be directors. I think they were coming to the Counseling Center to be clinicians. They probably -- after they did training with us -- decided that being a director was not what they wanted to do. [laughter]

NANCY STOLL: Let’s go back to the 1980s. Retention became an important buzzword in higher education in the ‘80s. And you were at the forefront of some early retention studies at Suffolk in the years before Suffolk hired its first enrollment manager, Dean I think it was. What prompted this interest in retention on your part?

KEN GARNI: Well, I had done some research, and had written some articles on student retention. I was always very curious about what percentage of college students actually finished their careers. And I think very early, as I talked to students, it became clear to me that there was some dissonance between what I was hearing from people at the university, in terms of their graduation rates, and what the students were saying about whether they were going to graduate or not.

[00:39:56]
I followed students in the Counseling Center, and worked collaboratively with your predecessor and the Dean of Students, Brad Sullivan, in trying to manage the university database for what students did four, five, and six years into their enrollment. It became clear that, at Suffolk, and I thought the numbers were astronomically high when I came to the conclusion, that somewhere between 40 to 50 percent of students graduated in four years. And, at best, 60 percent graduated in six.

I was amazed to read that that was a normal retention or attrition rate. And that just caught my attention. I became, I think, the chair of the Retention Committee at one point. And did some more research on campus about—especially commuter students’ retention rates were much lower than residential students. I think that I don’t know what the data is now. But I am assuming that, over the last ten or fifteen years, that the overall retention rate has
probably risen at Suffolk, primarily because of retention students—I mean residential students. I'm not sure that’s the case, but you can confirm that.

[00:41:32] But I've always been concerned about trying to help university personnel identify possible reasons why a student would start to think about leaving rather than staying. And a lot of my research came to the conclusion that it wasn’t very long after students arrived at a university, that the vulnerable ones were already thinking about leaving before they had even had a chance to sort of align with and attach to the university.

So, I spent a lot of time sort of pushing for outreach programs and support programs and first year programs, because my research showed that freshman students very quickly into their freshman year, those who were especially vulnerable, would make the decision to withdraw either during the freshman year or at the end of their freshman year.

**NANCY STOLL:** Well, I think some of your work led to some changes that we made in the orientation programs in terms of trying to catch students’ interests differently through some well-thought-out orientation activities and programs, even before they started their academic work. That was a feature of some of the research that you had done, that we felt made a big difference.

[00:43:11] **KEN GARNI:** I think, once again, the change in the composition of the student body made it easier to develop those programs when you were there, because in many, many cases, those students came out of families whose mother or father or both had been in college. Early on, we were talking to parents who had no experience with going to college. So, they were not a very effective base of support for their students when their students—It was, in many cases, everyone was at a loss, because no one knew what lay ahead in those families.

[00:43:55]
In the ‘80s, or mid ‘80s, there were more family members who could serve as support for students who were hesitant. But it was important, then, to use those parents as a support base for their students, because in many cases, those students didn’t go to their parents to do that. They avoided going to their parents, because they didn’t want to disappoint them.

NANCY STOLL: Right, right. Continuing in the 1980s, President Perlman, who was president through the ‘80s, sought to create a Student Affairs Division that would join in collaborative efforts [with] the fragmented departments that were currently in place. And since counseling is an academic department, it obviously would not fall under Student Affairs, as it did in many colleges and universities. Talk about the ways that the Counseling Center collaborated with Student Affairs in spite of the organizational structure limitations.

[00:45:00]

KEN GARNI: Well, I think we understood that being faculty members was an anomaly, and it was an organizational anomaly that had been in place for many, many years. But that, we taught courses for credit. We interacted with faculty. We were on faculty committees. We were actively engaged with faculty. But, in terms of services, we either provided services to faculty, or worked with all of the services that you’ve mentioned, student services, all the special programs that were being developed there, residential life, all of that.

So, it was almost like we were schizophrenic. I mean there were part of us that worked with academic programs that came out of academic departments. But then mostly doing outreach for specific academic departments that requested services to their disciplines. But the great majority of our referrals, and our outreach, and our interactions, albeit unofficial, were with people obviously associated with the dean of Student Services.

[00:46:15]

And even with your predecessor, I spent much time in his office working on collaborative interventions for students, trying to reach students out of the classroom, rather than solely
in the classroom. And that was much harder to do when we only had commuter students. Because in many respects, commuter students saw their education as yet another job. I mean they were—Job one was being a member of a family at home. Job two was having a job that paid, in many respects, their tuition. And then getting their education was another job. So, they spent very little leisure time on campus. It was very hard to capture them outside the classroom.

With your coming aboard, and developing and broadening student services, and then having, obviously, the residential life component start, we were able to do outreach to students out of class and on campus. That changed the dynamic of the relationships, because we could then follow up in real time what we were doing in therapy offices.

NANCY STOLL: Right. Remember the Monday morning meetings?

[00:47:30]
KEN GARNI: I do. I do. How could you forget them? Sorry, I was trying to avoid that. I think that was follow-up to the 24/7 [model], what went on during the weekend, how do we capture those students, and help them before they're either referred to much more severe clinical services—hospitalizations, and trying to keep them in school. So, working with director of residence life, campus police, the dean of students. All of those highlighted where the service delivery emphasis was in the last part of my career. I mean, students had—I mean I don’t know that students had different needs than they did years earlier. But they were expressed differently, because college to them, or college life at Suffolk had changed so radically.

NANCY STOLL: Right. Right. Let’s move to 1995, the PhD program in the Psych Department was approved. This was the first doctoral program for the university. What was your role in the creation of that program? And how did that PhD program [audio breakup]?

[00:48:51]
KEN GARNI: I'm trying to define my role, and I'm not finding the words. I was originally part of the planning for the development of that program, with the dean of the college, with the director of the Counselor Ed Department, with the chair and co-chair of the Psych Department, and myself, and our director of training. I think there was some dissonance in terms of using the Counseling Center as a training site for their students. And it was a push/pull dynamic, in the sense that we could not, at that point, train students with—our APA training program required that students be in doctoral programs, and were in the second year of their training experience. Therefore, the only—We couldn’t train the Psych Department students who only had a Master’s degree and had no clinical experience beyond that.

So, while I supported the idea of training, and while I thought the PhD program was a good idea, we backed off on being able to support those students in the first year of their experiential programs. My understanding is that it’s now the case where the Center is now taking Masters students from that program as interns. We ultimately had certain interns train in the Center, in their last year of training. We weren't [able] to do that because of our APA requirements in the first year. But we were capable of doing that when they were in their second or third year of experience.

NANCY STOLL: We mentioned parents a little while ago, in terms of the diversification of the parent population that was behind our student population. Can you talk a little bit about the impact that the change in parent involvement in the college?

KEN GARNI: You couldn’t ask that question without smiling, could you?

NANCY STOLL: Can you talk a little bit more about how that impacted the Counseling Center? It certainly impacted other offices.

[00:51:44]

KEN GARNI: Oh yeah. Honestly, I don’t think I spoke to a parent of any Suffolk student in the first 20 or 25 years of my career. By the time I left, I was speaking to
parents, the proverbial helicopters, on average, once a day. I think that parents—We went from not even considering parents other than when students were having troubles at home with their parents, helping them negotiate. But even then, the parents rarely, if ever, participated in our treatment of their students.

[00:52:42]
I think especially with residential life coming to Suffolk, that also brought the helicoptering phenomenon with it. Where parents were highly invested and involved in their parents’—in their students’ lives on campus, in ways that I never dreamt were possible. I mean there were parents who accompanied their 18 to 21-year-old students to their therapy sessions. There were parents who would call and ask us to talk to their student, who was between classes, walking down the street on Tremont Street. And this was a parent calling me from Illinois, because they knew so much about what was going on in Boston.

[00:53:31]
I think parents hovered in their students’ lives, well intentioned and well meaning, but made it very difficult for those students to act independently. And certainly, it made it more difficult for those students to access services in a confidential, protected, independent way. I think, you know, as you and I know, talking to parents during orientation changed radically too, over the years, because you could tell, then, how much parents were interested and invested in their investment. And wanted to be sure that they could be included in knowing how their students were doing, what their grades were, what their relationship to faculty were, what their relationship to roommates were. So that definitely changed how we provided services. And we had to be much more careful about what we said and recommended for students because, in many ways, we were also recommending it to the parents.

NANCY STOLL: Right. Right. Well, as you’ve alluded to, there was a whole cadre of programs and outreach that grew up around that concern. We had parent orientation, we had a parent handbook, we've got a parent newsletter. We gave them the lecture in
orientation about, stay out of it. But, so there was a whole collection of activity that was intended to try to give students the opportunity to become adults and make different decisions.

[00:55:21]

KEN GARNI: Again, a very well-intentioned program, well met. But don’t ask me if I think it was that successful. I’m sure it was, to some degree. But just the fact that parents, in spite of all of that, the next morning would be calling you and asking you. I mean I gave many, many parents advice about not calling the dean of Student Services, because she wasn’t going to give you any information either, that kind of interaction. I spent a lot of time on the phone with parents in the 10 years before I retired.

NANCY STOLL: Yeah. I think that was true for all of us. You worked under three deans of Arts and Sciences, I believe. When you first came, was it Dean Grunewald?

KEN GARNI: I know I worked under six presidents.

NANCY STOLL: Yes. But the three deans that you worked under, can you comment about the impact that each one of them had on the growth and development of the Counseling Center?

[00:56:41]

KEN GARNI: Yeah. I think, the deans themselves were, almost without exception, hands-off in terms of how the Counseling Center functioned. I think that, as those deans were ultimately my boss, I spent a lot of time in their offices, again, describing what the Center wanted to do, what it needed to do, what its responsibilities were, especially towards the latter part of my career, when, as you mentioned, we have faculty and family involvement in the delivery of our services. We have legal and ethical and all sorts of medical complications and involvements that made the service delivery that much more onerous, in some cases.
I spent, especially with Dean Ronayne, much time discussing the legal and ethical implications of service delivery or not. I think that was probably scary for both of us. So as long as we didn’t have any significant problems, I think he trusted my judgment and my experience to give me, I won’t say carte blanche, but he gave me a lot of space to make decisions without having to get prior approval or acceptance.

I think early on the two prior deans or prior dean didn’t know. I mean again, it was one of those situations where the Counseling Center wasn’t a known quantity for most of the leadership of the University. So, my job was to educate more than get help from them. I think that, as a faculty member, we were always judged in terms of what did we need compared to other faculty? What were the services that were required? And what did I need to provide those services?

I would say I always got the support I needed. Sometimes I had to fight very hard for it but I always felt that, ultimately, my bosses understood the need for the Counseling Center, and the importance of it, even though I think they were scared of it.

NANCY STOLL: Yeah. You mentioned that the six presidents that you worked under, were there particular ways that any of those presidents reached out to you, or made use of your expertise?

KEN GARNI: Yes. The first president was Judge Fenton. I had very little interaction with him, because he was not there very long after I got there. I had a very active interaction, relationship with Tom Fulham. It was mostly around confidentiality of services. He was honest in accepting the fact that he didn’t know what Counseling Services were but he wanted to make sure they were provided to everybody. He and I had some back-and-forth about confidentiality, and how we protected it, and what the University needed to get from us about the students. And that’s always a rub with counseling centers and university personnel; the issue of confidentiality is one that is probably not well
understood at times by either directors of counseling centers or university personnel who have other needs to get information.

But I had a very warm relationship with him, in the sense that he was always eager to learn about the role of the Counseling Center on the campus, and very supportive of our doing it. My relationship with probably the most active president, in terms of seeking services from the Counseling or seeking my advice about what he or she could do, was David Sargent, because he had interactions with me when he was a faculty member in the law school. He was the President who tended to reach out more, and asked for advice about how to deal with problems that he wanted to deal with in the law school.

[01:01:27] But I think, ultimately, the presidents were supportive of the deans, who supported me, or supported the Counseling Center. I think sometimes, the presidents who came here from other institutions would bring their experience with their counseling centers at those schools. And there was a rub, at times, in terms of the reprioritization of services. But ultimately, I was very fortunate that my relationships with those presidents were positive enough that I could advocate for services, and at least get our needs on the plate when decisions were made. I never felt we were being sort of shunted aside. I think, to their credit, both presidents and deans often provided us with services, even though they were a little skittish about what those services meant.

NANCY STOLL: In the broad picture, what do you consider your most important contributions to Suffolk? What were your most important contributions to Suffolk?

[01:02:47] KEN GARNI: I think changing the university perspective about the role, function, and importance of counseling centers. I think that as I look back, if I hadn't been so stubborn and even, I guess, successful in making the Counseling Center visible, and going out, and relating its work to the work of other counseling centers through IACS and APA and Counseling Center Directors, we would not have been as well served to deal with the
significant changes on the campus that occurred, both the residential life and just the globalization and the heterogeneity of needs and student development.

[01:03:46]
The other thing, is making the Center visible, and working collaboratively, I grew up at Suffolk, at a time when collaboration was the norm, rather than the exception. I mean everyone cross-fertilized, was cross-discipline, because there was no other way to provide the services then. I think, over time, the services became more specialized and more needs-specific. So, it made it harder to interact collaboratively. But I think the Counseling Center was, I hope, always perceived as willing to outreach and willing to interact across the campus.

I think that people rarely understood that we were member—faculty members in the College of Liberal Arts. We provided services to everyone that you worked, or everyone that worked for you. We provided services to the law school. I interacted with the Business School. We taught in different venues. I think that the idea of working together became more and more important because the need for referrals played on the need to collaborate. And, as long as we were sort of considered to be an open book, people would be comfortable referring to us, regardless of what part of the campus we belonged to.

NANCY STOLL: Talk about your involvement with the baseball program.

[01:05:19]
KEN GARNI: That was a personal professional relationship. As a very old baseball player, I always—and I played baseball at a college that had all the resources, and all the facilities, that made it easy to play. I, from a very early part of my career, was fascinated at how the baseball team could compete at the level that I played at, with virtually no resources. They had to commute to practice. They had to commute to games. They didn’t have their own field. They didn’t have their own bus. I mean you know, it was just amazing to me that they did it virtually, in a vacuum, that nobody on the campus knew just
what an amazing group it was. How amazing it was, that they were able to do what they were doing.

[01:06:19]
I followed them as a fan. And then I became sort of a quasi-psychologist for the team when the coach realized that I had both the clinical experience and the baseball experience that I could help them stay eligible. I became sort of a de facto advisor to the baseball team. And honestly, I loved watching them play, because they brought me back 30-40 years. And I could never have done what they did. And I'm so happy to know that they now have the resources that they deserved so long ago, that they can now compete on a level playing field. And they deserve that.

NANCY STOLL: Were there any particular situations that you got involved with, in terms of the baseball team that stick out in your mind? Where you felt you were particularly valuable?

KEN GARNI: Well, there were times when students were borderline not students any longer. They were having—You know, they were acting out in the classroom. They couldn’t handle their priorities. They were falling behind. They were getting angry with their coach. I very often would play devil’s advocate at times. The coach would ask me if I’d go to a game, and they’d see me there, so they knew I was watching. Or some kid that was suspended would be asked to sit with me during the game, and we talked back and forth about what it meant for them to be suspended, what they were willing to do to get back on the field.

[01:08:11]
So yeah, I mean I relived some of my own experiences with some of these kids. And it was very gratifying to me that some of these students were able to graduate from Suffolk with a degree. I won’t say primarily because they played baseball. But baseball played a very big role in keeping them enrolled. If they had not had baseball, even under the worst of circumstances, they never would have made it through college as a student alone.
They worked hard student-wise, even though that was, in some cases, counterintuitive for some of them. And this was earlier on, a lot of inner-city students who came from inner city high schools, who were just barely prepared to go to Suffolk, who also were playing baseball. That was just a recipe for disaster. I was very happy to play a very small part in at least delaying the disaster.

[01:09:15]

And sometimes, seeing students that I thought would have very little, if any, chance to graduate from Suffolk, would someday hold up that degree and say, “See. I got it.” That was as important to me as I’m sure it was for them.

NANCY STOLL: If you could change anything about your years at Suffolk, or do anything differently, what would it be?

KEN GARNI: I don’t know what it would have been like to work for you for forty years if I hadn't had faculty rank. But, I think that that would have changed how I interacted with nonfaculty people. I sort of liked the idea that being a faculty member, and still working with you and the other student services, allowed me to sort of migrate through the campus without very many restrictions at all, and not being aligned with any one aspect of the campus.

[01:10:25]

I've looked back at my career a number of times, and I think, retrospectively, I end up saying I was so lucky. It started out as an accident. Forty years later, I left being eternally grateful that I had those forty years. I was able to work independently without a lot of intrusion, without a lot of people looking over my shoulder, telling me—although I probably needed it early on—telling me what needed to be done, or what had to be done. The mistakes that I or we made, I owned, because I had no one to blame but myself. So that the credits and the successes, the same way.
I would have liked to have had more resources early on. But, I mean, I think every counseling center director says the same thing. I was smart enough to follow my dissertation advisor’s advice when I got the job, and I went to him, and I said, “What do I do now?” His advice to me was, “Just make damn sure you hire people that are smarter than you are because they’ll make you look good.” And fortunately, I was able to do that. I mean I think that, you know, I was able to hire people who were very smart, but also were different than I was, in many, many ways. So, we filled in each other’s limitations, and reinforced each other’s strengths.

In terms of my staff and the programs we developed, you know, I look back and it reminded me that I had something to do with a lot of early stages and programs that are now very successful and very important at Suffolk. So how can you not feel good about that?

NANCY STOLL: Right. Interestingly, in your staff situation, you had staff who as faculty had tenure. And consequently, were with you for the life of their career, for the most part. And I'm wondering, when you look back on that, whether that was always an advantage. Or was there a downside to that?

KEN GARNI: Mixed bag. I think it was an advantage in what it did for hopefully reputation, morale, self-image of those who did get tenure. But it also challenged balancing the priorities, and sometimes having to write to reach tenure, having to publish to reach tenure, got in the way—or was challenged by the same need to provide services. It was a constant balancing act.

But I will say, because we had faculty rank, we had a nine-month contract, which was very unusual. And I was able to work in the summer times, to get faculty to spend most of their time in the summer working on their tenure ability. So, they did their research and their writing at times that they weren't seeing students around the clock. We were able to—It got
harder and harder, over time, for that to happen, because in all honesty, getting tenure at Suffolk has become increasingly more difficult. Over time, those who got tenure latest had to work harder to get it, to be eligible for it than I was when I got mine.

**NANCY STOLL:** The other thing that’s happened was the need for the counseling services to be fairly robust through the summer, and through semester breaks, and holiday breaks, that we didn’t any longer see this sort of complete drop-off of student need facilities. That was a challenge, due to the fact that there were faculty, that the faculty calendar was operating in terms of their staff.

[01:15:05]

**KEN GARNI:** No question. That was probably the biggest adjustment that my staff had to make towards the end of my time at Suffolk. I think that, as I said, early on it was nine to five, five days a week. You were nine months, you’d spend the three months—There was no summer school to speak of then. My staff could spend the summer doing their research and doing their writing. It was relatively simple then.

But there were, as we got closer to, you know, the end of my career, there were multiple demands on our time, you know. Clearly, we had evening hours as the evening school became more robust. We had to work more into the summer. I had staff that were—we were staffed all summer, even part-time. And then as the needs increased and spread that became more fulltime in the summer. The contracts went from nine to eleven months.

[01:16:08]

And that was difficult for people who had been there for the nine-month period. I think now, when you come to the Counseling Center at Suffolk, you know what you’re experiencing. You’re there for 11 months. And that’s it, you don’t have to write. You don’t have to get tenure. So, it’s clean, in that respect, as it was early on. I think the problem was in the middle ground there, where there was a move towards the eleven-month non-tenure, away from nine months with tenure.
NANCY STOLL: Are there one or two experiences that stand out in your memory as exemplifying the core values at Suffolk?

KEN GARNI: I think, looking back, especially in later years, the cooperation when we were dealing with emergency situations. We always were able to rely on non-counseling staff to help us navigate or mitigate crises. Whether it was the university police, or health services, or student services, or even faculty members that were involved with students, we always were able to get them to do things that we couldn’t do, because we were in the midst of a crisis. So that the feeling of going back to the collaboration and the cooperation, I think was there, and that’s always been very important to me.

I think that the willingness, or the flexibility of people at the university to help bring students back to the campus, or to support students while they had to be off campus, that was also, I always interacted with other counseling center directors. The inevitable response to me was, “You're very lucky that you get that. Because when we’re in the midst of a crisis, it’s like all hands-on deck here. Everyone else disappears.”

I never had that feeling. I always felt that, if I needed to ask somebody to help me, I might get a shrug of the shoulders, but they would help. So yeah, I never felt that we were all alone against the world, trying to navigate a difficult situation.

NANCY STOLL: In retirement, what activities are claiming your time?

KEN GARNI: I am a fulltime grandfather to five very active grandkids. And I love it. As you may know, my retirement changed radically one month after I left. I'm now spending a lot of time as a primary caregiver. That’s also very rewarding, although at times frightening. So those two things have taken up the bulk of my time. I have maintained relationships with people I’ve worked with. Pre-COVID, we went out to meals quite a lot, stay active, trying to be in contact with some of the early interns that I have. And we still,
at a distance, although they don’t need it, still count on me to mentor them. So that’s rewarding.

And I’m now coaching my six-year-old granddaughter to play soccer. I vowed never to do that again, but her mother twisted my arm. So, I spend one Sunday every week—I guess there’s only one Sunday in every week—coaching six-year-olds, and reliving my experience coaching my eight-year-old daughter, 40-some-odd years ago.

NANCY STOLL: And how is the team doing?

[01:20:25]
KEN GARNI: We won’t talk about that.

NANCY STOLL: Oh, okay. [laughter]

KEN GARNI: I’m just coaching them. We don’t win or lose when we’re six years old. But we also don’t get trophies.

NANCY STOLL: Oh, there you go. As we close out this interview, is there anything else you would like to address, that we have not discussed?

[01:20:50]
KEN GARNI: No, I’m just—this has got me thinking about how lucky I was to work there as long as I did, under the circumstances I did. I think, you know, Suffolk was—has always fought the sort of second-class citizen mentality. I think when I went there, there were a lot of things that could be done to enhance the reputation of the university, to make it a better functioning institution, as it has become. But I was there at a time when you could significantly impact change, based only on interpersonal relationships. It was very simple in that respect. If you built those relationships, you could foster change.
Oral History Interview of Kenneth Garni (SOH-054)

I have always been very grateful that I came in at a time that you could do that and see the effects of your change on the system. And now I can look back, and you’ve reminded me that, some of the things that are really important there, I played a small role in developing half a century ago. You can't do better than that. So yeah, I have very few, if any, regrets over my career there. I have always felt very, very grateful that I had it. I mean it was fulfilling. It was challenging. I felt productive. And by the time I left, I felt like I knew what I was doing.

NANCY STOLL: And your good work laid the foundation for the changes that then came about, as we moved forward with the movement away from the academic department model, and the combination of counseling and health and wellness that has occurred in recent years. I mean I think all that was built on the foundation that you left.

[01:23:06]

KEN GARNI: Well, I don’t want to take all the credit for it. I had plenty of help. I think, it goes back to almost everybody that I interacted with early in my career, had been at Suffolk for many, many, many years. There was very little turnover. So, they were committed to the institution. They worked hard to improve it. And it was easy to work with them collaboratively. I think we’re all in this together. What can we do? You know, we all complained about having, you know, not enough resources to do too much work. But that wasn’t a unique experience.

[01:23:45]

And I think we all realized, then, that if we worked together, we could sort of parcel out the responsibilities and get things done. Now it feels good, looking back, that I see all the things that are going on, all the buildings that are being bought, all the new programs, all the internationalization, all the increase in sporting activities, the sort of state-of-the-art exercise buildings, and all of that. It makes me feel good that I played a very small role in many of those initiatives. So, you know, it’s ongoing. I retired ten years ago but I'm still getting the afterglow ten years later. And it feels great.
NANCY STOLL:  Well, I want to thank you for your willingness to be interviewed. Your experiences will certainly enrich the history of Suffolk. And I think that provides meaning to some of the facts about the university, personal experiences that we’re able to capture in interviews. Your many contributions will be documented. I and others are grateful for your willingness to share your experiences and participate in this oral history project. Thank you.

[01:25:11]

KEN GARNI:  Thank you for including me. I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW