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Susan Graham Interview: Paula Fass and Christina Maslach, "Academic Pioneers: Women at Berkeley in the 1970s and 1980s." Interviews with Berkeley's pioneering women professors, Berkeley, CA. Conducted 2019-2023.

Christina Maslach:

Name and date of birth please.

Susan Graham:

I'm Susan Graham and I was born on November 16, 1942.

Christina Maslach:

Okay. And where did you do your education? College and graduate school?

Susan Graham:

I went to Radcliffe College in Harvard University and then I went to Stanford. I was a math concentrator at Harvard, and I was a computer science major at Stanford.

Christina Maslach:

Okay, great. And then, what else? Anything you want to say about family, partner, spouse, children, parents, anything that you think is relevant in terms of?

Susan Graham:

Well, my father was an engineer. My mother taught third grade. For her whole career she stayed with third grade. My husband was a computer science professor here at Berkeley, and I have a stepson who lives in Berkeley who was 11 when we were married.

Christina Maslach:

Okay. Okay, great. Is he in engineering too or...?

Susan Graham:

No, no, he would not even take calculus because he wanted to make sure that he didn't do what we did. And so, he's a professional speaker.

Christina Maslach:

Oh, okay. So, did you have jobs before you came here to Berkeley?

Susan Graham:

I had summer jobs. I spent the summer after my junior year working for the Federal Power Commission in Washington, which became part of DOE. The summers when I was in graduate school, I worked on campus. And then, when I was writing my dissertation, I went to New York to the Courant Institute for Mathematical Sciences, which is part of NYU. And I was teaching there. I had some kind of acting position because I didn't have a PhD yet. And then I came to Berkeley.

Christina Maslach:

So could you tell me a little bit about what the hiring process was like for you when you came to Berkeley? How did you find out about the job? How did the process go? I mean, any interesting things about why you got the job?

Susan Graham:

So, I had decided to leave Courant. And I started looking around, but meanwhile I had met the man who became my husband, and we decided that we wanted to be in the same place, and he was a tenured professor at Berkeley. And so, we looked around and he must have told me that there was an opening at Berkeley because I didn't really look - I interviewed with the people at Berkeley and elsewhere who had come to me, who had contacted me. There was an opening at Berkeley because somebody had left it, an assistant professor had left. But I don't remember much about, you know, what the job description was or anything like that.

And I came out here and I gave a talk. And I met the other faculty members. It was a young department, Computer Science, and I was the seventh person. It had been formed in 1968. I came in 1971 and the department had been promised a lot of positions. They'd been promised growth. And then the Black Studies program came along and the FTE that had been promised to computer science went to form the Black Studies program. And so, everybody was very disappointed, but that was what it was. But there was an opening. So, I came, and I interviewed, and I don't know much at all about what went on internally. I do know that the then chair held up my appointment and I don't think it had much to do with me. It had to do with my future spouse.

Christina Maslach:

Oh, you mean like a nepotism rule or...?

Susan Graham:

Well, that was certainly part of it. Although we were not engaged, my future husband abstained from the discussion about who to hire because he had a personal interest in my being hired. And, so the chair complained that there was a nepotism issue. I think there was some animosity between the two of them, and he may have figured that if I didn't come to Berkeley, he, my husband would leave. Which he might well have.

So I don't know what all went on. I just know that I was told that the department had voted to offer me a position and then the offer didn't come, and it didn't come. And I was holding onto my other offers and stringing them along. I was later told that Betty Scott had gotten involved and said, no, this is not a nepotism case and what business do you have holding back this offer? And then I got the offer. So there was no question of negotiation. And in fact, at that time, I don't think I would have negotiated anyhow. I was not very assertive. And, as far as I knew people didn't do that. It never occurred to me. So he made me whatever the offer was. And, I accepted it, and I think I had to swear a loyalty oath. I don't remember for sure. I was in South America. I spent that summer teaching at the University of Chile, and I had to go to the American embassy to fill out the papers. And I think there was a loyalty oath.

Christina Maslach:

It probably was. It probably was. Okay. So, when you then started the job and showed up, got your office, started teaching, meeting faculty, other colleagues, how did things go? Was it fine?

Susan Graham:

It was mostly fine. I was reminded by Rhona at the panel last week that I had in fact been assigned five distinct courses for the three quarters of my first year. As it turned out, I got seriously ill late in the fall, and I was on leave in the winter quarter. So I didn't end up teaching five distinct courses. I ended up teaching three distinct courses, and I'm not sure that that would have happened to anybody else, but I don't know for sure. I mean five courses was the teaching load, but five distinct courses in your first year of teaching is a bit much.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah.

Susan Graham:

My colleagues were fine. There was one other assistant professor, and part of the attraction of coming to Berkeley was collaborating with him. So that was great. One of the senior members of the department had spent a sabbatical at Stanford while I was a graduate student, so I knew him.

Christina Maslach:

Okay. Well that's cool.

Susan Graham:

And so, it was all fine. I mean, there was this person who had tried to block my appointment, but I got along all right.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah, that was good. It's interesting to think about it because your department was so new, as opposed to one that had been here, and had a lot of tradition going for that. So that may have been factor in your favor there. A number of the women have talked about having, in the early years, challenges to their authority when they were teaching. And I don't know if you ever found something like that. I mean, some people were not comfortable with somebody that was young, a woman in charge, giving out grades, etc.

Susan Graham:

I had some of that. I had taught in New York, and so it wasn't the first time I had stood in front of a group. I mean, people were more informal with me than they were with the male faculty. But I think I held on to the classroom. Teaching itself wasn't a problem. There were comments in teaching evaluations that men wouldn't get.

Christina Maslach:

Like what?

Susan Graham:

The way I wrote on the board, and that I didn't tell enough jokes, and I was too formal and...

Christina Maslach:

Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. But there was nothing that was calling you out specifically as a woman, or something like that?

Susan Graham:

I mean, I knew a lot about a subject that most of them were eager to learn.

Christina Maslach:

To learn. So, as opposed to the "Hey lady, what do you know?" Kind of kind of like that. And your research program, I mean, how was that getting it started?

Susan Graham:

That wasn't difficult for me. I got here and there was a student who was midway through his PhD program who really wanted to work with me. He finished at the end of my second year. At the end of six years, I had had five PhD students finish. So I just came into an environment in which I inherited the students of my junior colleague who had left two years later. And I had terrific students.

Christina Maslach:

That's great.

Susan Graham:

It was wonderful.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah. Wow. So, could you talk about the transition and when it occurred, to engineering?

Susan Graham:

I started in L&S in the fall of 1971, and the merger of computer science and EECS in the College of Engineering happened in the fall of 1973. It was announced in the spring of '73, so two years later...

Christina Maslach:

Two years later. Wow.

Susan Graham:

And that was when my junior colleague left Berkeley.

Christina Maslach:

Ah, okay. So a lot of change right there.

Susan Graham:

Yeah, and we were merged into a much larger department. It was a department that some of the people in computer science had left to form the computer science department, and now they were going back, and one of them was my husband (who by then was actually my husband). So, I inherited all of his political baggage. People assumed that his opinions were my opinions. Oftentimes they didn't even ask me what I thought. And so that meant that while some people were very welcoming, others were not.

Christina Maslach:

Okay. So, what was your life like, back in Engineering, when it was now under a whole different administration than L & S?

Susan Graham:

I had never been in an engineering program. There was no engineering at Harvard and, computer science was in Humanities and Science at Stanford. And so, there were a lot of parts of the engineering culture that I had to learn. The real challenge was that the electrical engineering side of the department had all the power. They were very paternalistic. And the only reason there was a division of computer science within the department was because that had been negotiated as one of the conditions of the merger. And the second condition was that we would continue to have L & S undergraduates, undergraduate majors. And the third thing was we were going to give PhDs in computer science rather than PhDs in engineering.

So we were special in certain ways within the college and certainly within the department, a division was an anomalous structure. There were no other divisions. And as I say, they were very paternalistic. And so, it's hard to separate my experience as a computer scientist from my experience as the only woman in engineering.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah. So, were you physically in a different building as a result of that?

Susan Graham:

We stayed in Evans Hall, which is where the department had been. The computer science people who had been hired directly into engineering - there was competition, which is part of the reason for the merger - a lot of them moved into Evans as well, so that we were together.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah. So, you weren't sort of split in some ways physically. Well, that's good. So, did you attend meetings in the College, or just the department or..?

Susan Graham:

I don't remember much about department meetings. I do remember the first College of Engineering meeting I went to, in which people were very curious about me because there were no other women. But they weren't interested in me professionally. They weren't curious

about my research. They were curious about me. And so I don't think I went to a lot of other College meetings for a long time. I eventually started going back, but...

Christina Maslach:
Yeah, okay.

Susan Graham:
And I do remember that the department meetings were late in the day, and there was no thought to the fact that maybe people had obligations at home, because nobody else did.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. Somebody else was taking care of that.

Susan Graham:
That's right. And in fact, years later when there were some other women in the department, we had a conversation with the then department chair about the fact that late afternoon meetings were disadvantageous to them. So that's when they switched it. We now have a faculty lunch that we've had for years.

Christina Maslach:
Okay. That's great.
So let's talk about your moving forward with teaching and research, and then coming up for tenure.

Susan Graham:
So I came up for tenure. I got tenure in 1976, five years after I came. And what had happened was that before the merger, engineering really wanted to build up in computer science because it was an emerging field - it was obviously going to be important. And so, they made a lot of hires and a number of the hires both at the senior level and the junior level were pretty weak. Because I mean, they were well intentioned, but they couldn't tell the difference. And so the year I came up for tenure, there were six of us that came up for tenure at the same time. I was the only one who had come from the L & S department. And they told my husband that he could not participate in the process at all. It wasn't just that he had to abstain from my case. He had to abstain from all six of them...

Christina Maslach:
Oh, really?

Susan Graham:
And it was clear that those decisions were going to affect the future of the program. But that's what they did.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah, interesting.

Susan Graham:

Three of us got tenure and three didn't. I think those were the right decisions. I mean, I knew the people.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah. So in terms of the strength of your case....

Susan Graham:

It turned out all right.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah. Okay. So it wasn't, I won't say uneventful, because tenure is a big decision.

Susan Graham:

Well, that's right. You know, it's always stressful until you get past it.

Christina Maslach:

Okay. As the 70s continued, then we had more affirmative action, different kinds of hiring policies, things like that. Do you remember those coming on board in engineering and might that have been useful for some of the subsequent women who were coming in?

Susan Graham:

Well, I mean, it was an issue, but they kept looking at the pool and the national pool was small. And there were always excuses not to hire women - even from colleagues who thought they were unbiased. Somehow, they always liked the male candidates better. And so, we didn't hire another woman for 20 years in computer science. There were some in electrical engineering.

Christina Maslach:

Okay. Were there women being hired in other departments as well?

Susan Graham:

A few, I mean, somewhere in there Alice Agogino was hired in mechanical engineering. And there was one woman who was hired in civil engineering who subsequently didn't get tenure and left. Avidah Zakhor, I think, was the first person in electrical engineering. And she was hired as an assistant professor, but I don't remember exactly when.

Christina Maslach:

Okay. But it wasn't as many, and it was kind of slower. Maybe in the '80s, was when Fiona Doyle came?

Susan Graham:

Fiona Doyle. Yeah. Probably in the eighties sometime. And then it picked up a little, but there was always this argument about the pool, even though the pool, however small, contained very

talented women.

Christina Maslach:

Did the pool start changing in terms of the graduate students who were being trained at Berkeley?

Susan Graham:

It improved. We had a group of women in computer science, fairly early on. It was started by two of our graduate students and that helped a lot. But a lot of people in computer science and in engineering even more generally don't go into academia.

Christina Maslach:

Ah, right. Okay.

Susan Graham:

So that's part of the challenge in recruiting.

Christina Maslach:

That's a good point you bring up, because obviously what some of the other people have been talking about in the interviews, is pretty much all academic-focused in terms of career. And I have to keep remembering that, particularly in the professional schools, that's not the only pathway.

Susan Graham:

Yeah. The two women who founded the Women in Computer Science program [which became Women in Computer Science and Engineering (WICSE)] both went into industry, and both had wonderful careers. But I don't think either of them was ever interested in an academic job.

Christina Maslach:

That's an interesting point.

Let's go on to the next topic. You mentioned a little bit about family life, your private life outside of the university, and how changing the late afternoon meetings was one factor. Were there any other kinds of things that posed some challenges for raising a child or doing family things, as a result of what you were being asked to do as a professor?

Susan Graham:

I didn't think about them. I did what came along. When my stepson was 13, he announced that he was going to come and live with us instead of with his mother. Which I think was the right decision for him, but here I was two years into being an assistant professor and a parent of an adolescent. And those were very interesting years. But I just did it. I mean, we did it, and I'm not sure it's that different from other couples who both have full-time jobs.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah.

Susan Graham:

If anything, the fact that we are both academics helped - there were times when we arranged our teaching so that we didn't teach on the same day. And we could do that. So, one of us was available if something happened.

Christina Maslach:

Right. Yeah. It's interesting you mentioned that. I'll just interject a little personal anecdote because my husband and I lived in San Francisco, so our daughters were there in school, and he's commuting to Stanford and I'm commuting to Berkeley. So, we always, always had to working out opposing, or I should say complementary, schedules. So that in case there was a sick child or something, one of us would be more able to pull out than the other.

Susan Graham:

At one point I was approached by Stanford, and we looked at that and we decided that already being in the same place meant that the commute was just going to be...

Christina Maslach:

That one of you would commute and the other one wouldn't...?

Susan Graham:

Well. Yes. Because it didn't seem to make sense to us to live in the middle. And we decided it was going to be too much of a burden.

Christina Maslach:

I can totally understand that. So, were there any other aspects of juggling all of this that presented more of a challenge or a burden, or was it just what you did, and you got through it and there was not a problem?

Susan Graham:

We, my husband and I, consciously worked on different things. I had met my husband because he was interested in my dissertation and was doing related work. But in the beginning, I, more than he, moved in a different direction. Years later, we did have a joint project, but mostly we kept it separate.

One of the really nice things was that we tended to go to the same conferences, and so we could travel together and travel abroad together. And we made a lot of long-lasting friends who lived in other places because we saw them professionally. So that was one of the big benefits of both being in the same field.

Christina Maslach:

That's a great benefit. As opposed to, we have totally different schedules, meetings, etc. I guess there are many different varieties of two professionals in a couple relationship like that.

How did you feel about other kinds of leadership positions? Was this something that you ever considered or did or said, "No, I'd rather be focusing on my work, my research?" Because sometimes women have said they were tapped, and others have felt that they could have but somehow never got...

Susan Graham:

Right. I have some skills in leadership and, as a woman in a man's field, I was invited to serve on external committees of various sorts earlier than I might have been otherwise. When I was asked to join, sometimes I knew that they were filling out the committee with a woman. When I was asked to chair a committee, I knew it wasn't because I was a woman, and that was part of what gave me more confidence in the department. At Berkeley, I can't separate the not being asked because I was female, from the not being asked because I was in computer science.

Christina Maslach:

Right. Okay.

Susan Graham:

Because for the first 15 years, at least, the chair of the department always came from electrical engineering, maybe 20 years. There was never a chair who came from computer science. There was an associate chair for the computer science division who had no authority whatsoever. I did turn that down once.

Christina Maslach:

A little subtle. Okay.

Susan Graham:

And then, by the time the department leadership had become more balanced, I was never asked -- but by then I was doing leadership things outside of the University. Professional organizations. I was on some fairly high-level advisory committees. I was one of the founders of a national council for computer science. I eventually served in the White House on Obama's President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. And I was open to doing those things because I wasn't busy with them at Berkeley.

Christina Maslach:

Those are great opportunities.

Susan Graham:

They were fabulous.

Christina Maslach:

Oh wow. You're getting tapped for things like that.

Are there any other things about the social life, within engineering? Or within the department?

Susan Graham:

In the beginning we were invited to people's homes, and we had some people over. The socializing declined over time; I think for everybody. People got busier and, in the beginning, most of the other women spouses didn't work. And so, it was easier for them to entertain. And we went through a wave in computer science of divorces, and then we went through a wave of marriages and young children. And of course, having a lot of people with young children changes the dynamics of all of that.

Christina Maslach:

Interesting. Okay. There's a larger social history in there, probably for the campus as a whole.

Susan Graham:

Yeah.

Christina Maslach:

Are there any particular things that sort of stand out to you as having been important or significant in some ways for your career, or work with other colleagues?

Susan Graham:

I had wonderful friendships and wonderful support in the computer science community. And it was very gratifying. We have an awards committee in the department that is made up of very senior people who look for opportunities to nominate people. At the moment, I'm chairing that committee.

And I would hear from friends outside, that my own award nominations were coming from outside of Berkeley and not from the department. In one instance, I was told by somebody (who shouldn't have told me) that he had approached the department about an award nomination, and the department was afraid my candidacy would compete with their chosen candidate. So, I was nominated from outside and was elected. As was the internal candidate. But the fact was that they wouldn't support my case because it was competing with the good old boy.

Susan Graham:

It was something he probably shouldn't have told me.

Christina Maslach:

So, are you always sort of wondering how do I take this, you know, in terms of...

Susan Graham:

Well, you know, I was pleased that I had all that support.

Christina Maslach:

I think that's a great thing. Yeah. And so that's really good.

Are there any kind of significant topics, issues, whatever, about your experience coming to Berkeley that I haven't even begun to touch on, and you think we should?

Susan Graham:

Well, Berkeley overall is a very strong, very good university and being here with a community of people, who are as smart and as interesting as all of my colleagues are, and the best of the students are really wonderful. So, that was all a very good experience. Later on, I started spending a lot of time at Harvard on the outside, and I could see the contrast between a public university and a private university, and then there were things I began to see about Berkeley that I hadn't realized before.

Christina Maslach:

Such as? I'm curious.

Susan Graham:

Challenges about resources for the university. A lack of support from the Regents. The Regents seem to feel that they are checking up on the university, you know, protecting the state's money rather than supporting us, and a private university board is very different from that.

Christina Maslach:

That is very interesting. One of the things that some other people have noted is that the publics, like Berkeley, at least were more likely to be developing their assistant professor talent, as opposed to a star system where basically you don't get a job until you've already become a full professor.

Susan Graham:

That's one of Berkeley's real strengths. That's due to Clark Kerr.

Christina Maslach:

Yeah. It's an interesting philosophy. I don't think we talk about it much, but it's clearly there in some way. I remember, when being at Radcliffe – Harvard, and I'd run into these assistant professors in Social Relations (my major), and they were all bemoaning the fact that they thought *they* would be the one who would get tenure, and all of them were really there for six years and then they were gone.

Susan Graham:

And they were in competition with one another. And our junior faculty are not.

Christina Maslach:

Not in that way. Yes.

So, is there anything else you would like to discuss here?

Susan Graham:

I think things have changed a lot. I mean, attitudes have changed in society in part, but they've

also changed at Berkeley. I look at our assistant professors, and the women are much more self-confident, and they're supported. I mean, people are enthusiastic about what they do. People share opportunities with them, in a way that I think didn't happen in the '70s. And so, you know, that's very good.

On the other hand, when I was looking, I was trying to remember when various things had happened. In preparation for this conversation, I came across some documents from the '90s and discovered we had at Berkeley a sexual assault policy in the '90s, which I hadn't remembered at all, although I do remember having male colleagues who were abusive to female students.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah.

Susan Graham:
But apparently that goes way back, and I look at that and I think, gee, we haven't come nearly far enough.

Christina Maslach:
Yeah. Interesting issue. It's sometimes daunting to sort of think about...

Susan Graham:
I came across a transcript - the first time I was on a visiting committee for another computer science department was in 1976. And they recorded our deliberations - there was a committee of three people - and transcribed them and gave them back to us so we could use them to write our report. And I was never allowed to finish a sentence in that conversation. I was constantly interrupted by my two male colleagues, and there it is documented in this transcript.

Christina Maslach:
Wow, that is fascinating. I know that many of us have said that we've had that experience, but to have the actual evidence that it really does happen, right there in the transcript - that's great.

Thanks, Susan - this was a wonderful interview!

END.