

Dr. Harvey Kesselman, Stockton University, Class of 1979

December 2015



Dr. Harvey Kesselman, President of Stockton University, has come a very long way – without going very far at all. He is a living and vibrant metaphor for Stockton’s first motto: “Plant yourself where you can grow.” He has grown and grown and grown since the first day he entered the first class at Stockton in 1971 in a well-worn hotel on Atlantic City’s boardwalk called the Mayflower.

With a few more wrinkles rather than tree rings, Dr. Kesselman, 44 years after his first steps on the Stockton boardwalk, grew to new heights in his career, when the Stockton University Board of Trustees on December 2, 2015 promoted him from Interim Stockton University President to President of Stockton University. Dr. Kesselman at the time of the appointment noted how “excited” he was to become the university’s fifth president and have “the opportunity to lead our wonderful university at this pivotal time.” But the words in print fail

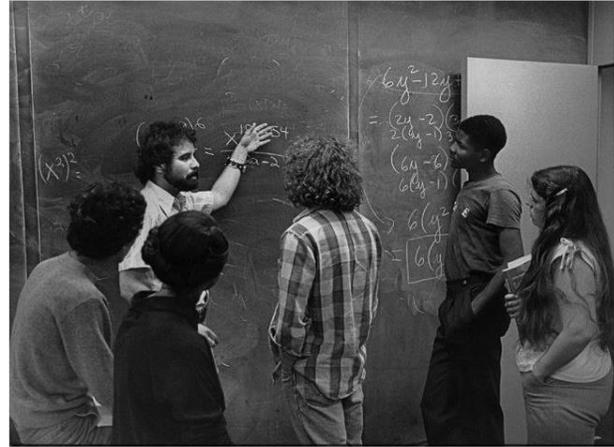
to convey the enthusiastic inflection in his voice or the sparkle in his eyes whenever he talks about Stockton’s past, present and future.

“My parents were the children of immigrants. My mother finished high school; my father completed eighth grade. They were tough, honest, hard-working folks, but higher education simply was not part of the family expectation. Stockton appealed to me, because it was created for young people just like me – first-generation college students – those who were determined to, and by necessity had to, make it on their own. In high school, I tested very well, but hated the confinements of the classroom. Stockton was the place where if you worked hard and pulled yourself up, the sky was the limit. It remains true to this very day,” said Dr. Kesselman.

As a self-described long-haired, Woodstock-participating, quirky hippie, he was attracted in 1971 to a Stockton education for embracing idealism, creativity, transformation – and academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences. “Before coming to Stockton, I was a kid who worked in the local Acme and gas station in Long Beach Island. I was unsure about college and then I heard about Stockton . . . Believe me when I say that no student was more in love with and excited by Stockton than this working-class young man,” he said.

Even though he entered college in 1971, he got his degree in 1979. He sought a double teaching certification (mathematics and political science) – and he traveled and worked but stayed rooted at the university. His first job at Stockton was as a tutor in the Education Opportunity Fund (EOF) program of which he became director a few years later. New Jersey’s EOF program provides financial assistance and support services (*e.g.* counseling, tutoring, and developmental course work) to students from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds that attend institutions of higher education in New Jersey. Dr. Kesselman’s infectious, energetic, and earnest passion for working with the EOF students, along with his hippie demeanor, gave him rock star status on campus.

Over the past 44 years, his administrative jobs have included: coordinator of residential life of the EOF program; assistant director of EOF program; director of the EOF program; director of Institutional Research; acting vice president for Student Services; associate vice president for Student Services; vice president for Student Services; special assistant to the President and chief executive officer of the Southern Regional Institute and Educational Technology Training Center; interim vice president for Administration and Finance; dean and professor of Education, School of Education; provost and executive vice president; acting president; interim president; and president.



The only reason why his resume is shorter than many high-level executives in higher education is that no space has to be wasted on the 'where,' when describing the 'what.' All positions have been at Stockton. While serving in a plethora of administrative roles for the past several decades, Dr. Kesselman has taught courses in 10 different subject matters, from mathematics to courses in higher education administration.

In spite of the Stockton-centric professional career, Dr. Kesselman found many opportunities to broaden his perspective. For example, he represented the senior public colleges and universities on the Governor's Task Force to improve the NJ STARS program. He served as technical advisor to the New Jersey Presidents' Council in the development and implementation of reporting standards for Accountability and Excellence. And he served as one of six representatives appointed by the Chancellor of Higher Education to author and develop the New Jersey Student Unit Record Enrollment (SURE) statewide data reporting and monitoring system. In summary, he has been appointed by five different governors and state education leaders to serve as a senior college representative on a number of authorities, committees and task forces.

He also served on his community's (Hamilton Township, Atlantic County) school board and township committee. Even that non-Stockton activity has a Stockton connection. His wife, Lynne Kesselman, who earned both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from Stockton, was the one who urged him to take on the important community service roles. She is a business and finance expert who worked as a day trader for two decades and just retired from being an "extraordinary" teacher, said her husband, who added that she has "far more patience as a teacher" than he has.

Of all the many remarkable Stockton faculty and staff who Dr. Kesselman said influenced his growth, the one mentor placing the "indelible" stamp on him and the university was Dr. Vera King Farris. In an essay authored by Dr. Kesselman celebrating the 40th anniversary of Stockton, he noted how Dr. Farris began her two-decade tenure as president in 1983, when the institution was only 12 years old. She created "the environment for excellence at the college - moved it from an open to a selective admission process, resulting in substantial increases in the average SAT scores and high school class ranks of entering freshmen. Student retention and graduation rates consistently improved. Stockton's minority student success rate was the highest among the senior public colleges and universities in New Jersey."

Simultaneously, she cultivated Harvey Kesselman's environment for success. She organized his talents at EOF and then directed his path forward. "In 1983 she said to me that I would be one of her vice presidents someday. I was incredulous. I had no advanced degree. She made me part of

her cabinet whose members were all vice presidents, as soon as I took on the job as director of Institutional Research and Planning,” he said.

Dr. Farris forged a culture of success that centered on the following simple formula, according to Dr. Kesselman: “people deeply committed to the institution, sustained hard work, and outside-the-box thinking,” soil that was just perfect for Dr. Kesselman’s growth.

Dr. Kesselman never would have been in a position for Dr. Farris to notice him, however, had it not been for Stockton’s Mayflower-era faculty members. He singled out Dr. William Daly, an “incredible” mentor, teaching political science. “Bill took me – a free-spirited, never-playing-by-the-rules kid – and transformed me into a serious scholar with a passion for education, challenging me with conversation and rigorous courses and not letting me get away with any slacking,” said Dr. Kesselman, who went on to receive his bachelor’s degree in Political Science from Stockton under Professor Bill Daly’s watchful eye. And then with encouragement of Dr. Farris, he earned his master’s degree in Student Personnel Services/Counseling from Rowan University, and his doctorate in Higher Education Administration from Widener University.

Dr. Kesselman’s fondness for Philosophy Professor Allen Lacy was evident in the note he wrote to the Stockton community upon the recent death of Dr. Lacy. “During his retirement, Allen was an active gardener and columnist for the *New York Times* and other major publications. He and his son Michael have remained very close to Stockton, and both of Michael’s daughters have attended Stockton. On a personal level, I was fortunate to have been taught by Allen while at the Mayflower, and am honored to have known him for all of these years.”

The Kesselman tree was on the verge of being transplanted to Maine, when he was named president of the University of Southern Maine, effective July 2015. Then Stockton President Herman Saatkamp went on medical leave, and the university board of trustees asked Dr. Kesselman to stay on as acting president. Board Chair Madeleine Deininger wrote to the University of Southern Maine in May on behalf of the trustees and asked that Dr. Kesselman be allowed to withdraw from his contract. Dr. James Page, chancellor of the University of Maine System, agreed.

“Stockton has been a part of me since its founding, and I cannot walk away now,” said Dr. Kesselman at the time.

Off and running with his responsibilities as president, he conjured up the spirit of his mentors Farris and Daly when referring to his goals for the future. “It’s simple – it’s all about the students. I want to do whatever I have to do to create the best possible experience for the students so when they leave Stockton, they are equipped to create the best possible experiences in the world for others. I want to teach and inspire the way I was taught and inspired. Actually, I would love to end my career teaching on the boardwalk.”

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