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Panel 11 and Panel 12: A New Branch on a Growing Tree: Birth of the 'Bay Campus' (1965-1968)

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A New Branch on a Growing Tree: Birth of the ‘Bay Campus’ (1965-1968)

The first students at USF St. Petersburg attended classes here out of necessity, not by choice. The Tampa campus, opened with fewer than 2,000 students in September 1960, had grown substantially over its first five years. As the University started to take on the characteristics of a commuter school, President John S. Allen and his administrative team began to ponder long-term solutions to USF’s surging enrollment.

With the departure of Florida Presbyterian College and the disbanding of the Florida Institute for Continuing University Studies (FICUS), USF had hoped to take possession of the former maritime buildings at Bayboro Harbor as a future site for upper-level and graduate courses. However, the University faced an urgent and more immediate crisis during the summer of 1965. Admissions officers had mistakenly accepted more residential students than the school could accommodate in the fall trimester. With an enrollment crisis looming on the horizon, officials looked across Tampa Bay for a short-term solution.

That summer, administrators decided to develop the Bayboro facility into an overflow campus for students from outside of Pinellas County who needed dorms. Though the “freshman experiment” only lasted until the end of 1966, its success set a precedent and soon encouraged USF to develop the first branch campus within the State University System of Florida.

A Rough Start

“Over the years, I expect the Bay Campus to be enlarged as certain temporary buildings are replaced. The Bay Campus will become an increasingly significant part of the University of South Florida.”  
—John S. Allen, USF’s first president, in a September 1965 interview just before the beginning of classes.

Nearly 260 freshmen were caught off guard. They had applied to USF and expected to take up residence somewhere between Fowler and Fletcher avenues. They soon learned, however, that they were instead to report for duty across the bay. The first fresh appeared, with suitcases in hand, during the first week of September. Classes began on September 7.

“The brochures made it sound like it was Miami Beach, but just look at it!”

“At an opening convocation, President Allen reassured students and parents that first-time jitters were common. They toured the classrooms, visited the library’s small reading room, nibbled on dinner in the cafeteria, and enjoyed smooth jazz. Then the parents went home. And the fun began.

Despite these challenges, the freshmen forged strong bonds in the barracks by the bay. At the end of the year, Reilly and Sugarman handed out charter class certificates and told the soon-to-be sophomores that their “basic training” prepared them for future academic—and real world—challenges.

When the freshmen left for the summer, Peace Corps volunteers and Head Start workers honed their skills along the harbor before traveling to distant villages and classrooms. In the fall of 1966, a new group of nearly 360 freshmen came to the Bay Campus as the second wave of students.

The August 1965 edition of Sundry, a publication for the University community, celebrated the dedication of the Bay Campus.