A Chat with Dr. Savoie

Students at CACS/CMPS have been excited by Dr. Savoie’s return, as President, to our beloved university. Recently, Mayassa Al-Najjar, an active CACS student, and Jamie Mason, a CMPS graduate and current CACS student, had a hearty chat with Dr. Savoie, who welcomed them with a family-like atmosphere. He answered their questions candidly and clarified issues they brought up. The following is an excerpt from their chat.

**Dr. Bayoumi:** Last year we celebrated 50 years of computing at UL. We started by offering the first computer course in 1959. It was very interesting when I met the 50th anniversary graduating UL class, I found two people who were in the first Computer Science class.

It is very significant that UL started computer science much earlier than many other universities! UL went even one more step higher in 1984 by creating the Center for Advanced Computer Studies, which also celebrated its 25th anniversary. This was a transformational step that kept us ahead of many schools. We would like to hear your views on keeping CACS and computer science at the lead.

**Dr. Savoie:** Computer science has really been one of the major factors to put the university on the academic map. We were so far ahead with this new technology. Really, it did a couple of things. One, the graduate program gave us academic legitimacy. Because we were so far ahead of everyone in those early days, there was no one competing in these areas. Also, because we were in the game so early, we were the training and breeding ground for people who became leaders in technology. So little of that was going on that they left and went to other places to establish programs, and carried the university with them. Again, I think, enhancing the university’s standing, especially in technology areas. And because we had such good people and it was such a new field, not restricted by history and tradition, they did a lot of innovative things.
Engineering, all those related fields, telecommunications came in at one point in time... So we were able to attract outstanding people who expanded the discipline and with that the university benefited from its reputational standpoint. We started adding more graduate programs and it made them legitimate because of our reputation. It was our flagship graduate area, if you will.

Then, the whole idea with CACS, where the focus is graduate education and research. Often in disciplines you have a big separation of research and instruction. A faculty member is either a researcher or a teacher. They don’t mix a whole lot. CACS keeps that jumbled together, which I think from a student perspective, you have the advantage of good practical instruction and exposure to the latest research. We have tried to emulate that in other disciplines as well but in CACS really works well. Also, because of the lack of rigidity in the discipline, the partnerships with other disciplines (art, film studio, engineering) all of those areas are benefitting from that relationship and the collaboration that is occurring.

Thank goodness somebody had the foresight to get into this field early on. It’s always a challenge to try to stay on the cutting edge.

Dr. Bayoumi: This brings us to the following point: many schools are progressing at a fast rate, are we at a point where we need another transformational step to keep our competitiveness and leading edge.

Dr. Savoie: Technology has become so central to the human condition that it’s hard to define the discipline anymore. It’s spread out into so many other things. It’s good to have an entity like CACS and the research scientists we have, who are looking at new applications, the next horizon, so what we can do is foster that environment. We have numbers of outstanding researchers who have the support for research so they can discover. CACS should lead!!

What is the next horizon? I don’t know. My thought is more of a marriage of computer science and biology. That’s the next big wave that will come together. Disease, health, and how technology can affect that. Nanotechnology, all those things. That’s the new world.

Jamie: Coming up as an undergrad in the computer science department here, I know that undergraduates don’t always understand the strategic plan of the university and how it impacts their education. What would you say to these undergraduate students is going on with the strategic plan to directly impact their education and improve their experience here?

Dr. Savoie: That’s a good question. In the new strategic plan, you’ll see some references to improve student success. Access to world class educational opportunities. Our obligation is to make sure our undergrads have that quality undergraduate experience, so they are not limited, so they can move in whatever direction interests them, and they have the avenues to pursue those types of things. That’s part of the strategic plan, the quality of the undergrad experience. Not just in this discipline, but in other departments as well.

Mayssaa: Students in our department are worried about budget cuts and its impact on CACS and Computer Science. What would you tell students about this situation?

Dr. Savoie: It is a serious challenge we face. We had a 4.6% reduction mid-year, and this current year is 7.8% in addition, so that’s over 12%. Tuition can cover a little bit of that. It’s been over 50 years since we’ve had this size budget reduction in one year. So you can’t deal with that without reducing something. We are trying to protect student services as best we can, and we’re trying to protect our most important asset in providing a quality academic experience for our students, and that’s our faculty and professional staff. Many schools are doing layoffs and furloughs, we have not done that, at least at this point. We have a hiring freeze and deal with a lot of it
on attrition, so as positions come available, we won’t fill those positions. That will put some pressure on faculty to pick up additional courses, and that sort of thing, but shouldn’t result in loss of student access to courses. We’re going to reduce, we’ve been spending quite a bit lately in sprucing the campus up, doing deferred maintenance. We wanted to stay aggressive with that, but we’ll have to cut that back significantly. More aggressive energy management, and reduce the cost of operations.

We are also looking at: how can we generate additional revenue? We’re looking at certain things, some of which will affect students, like adding various fees and get more money. We’re looking at some partnerships with private enterprise to create business opportunities. Things like the hotel that we have at the research park, the university owns a part of that. We’re going to do more of those kinds of things. So it’s a combination of reducing expenditures, cuts, avoiding operational costs through changing the way we do business in some areas and trying to generate new revenue.

Mayssaa: This brings another question. Most students in CACS and computer science are international students. How do you think they will manage financially given that their salaries are the same, but tuition and expenses are increasing?

Dr. Bayoumi: The out of state tuition has gone up tremendously. I have been getting complaints from students.

Dr. Savoie: The idea is to maximize revenue without affecting attendance or enrollment. So you have to provide the right kinds of scholarships, tuition waivers, assistantships, all those kinds of things so that you can maximize revenue, but don’t negatively affect enrollment. It’s a seesaw you have to balance just right. We do have some new out of state, primarily international scholarships that we offered last year for the first time, and we are adding more to them for this year.

Dr. Bayoumi: I think we need to work on a global intensive recruiting plan. CACS recruiting efforts have been highly dependent on faculty. I go myself to recruit internationally. The university should look into going to recruiting exhibits. The competition for higher education globally is very strong. In the past, the U.S. used to be the king of higher education. There is now competition from Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, and Europe. What is your view on this?

Dr. Savoie: I agree with you. Our market has changed. India added several new engineering schools in the last 10 years. The competition has gotten much more keen. You have to have a niche in the marketplace, which we do, with computer science. I don’t think you can try to compete in a broad range of areas. Some schools can, Harvard can, but we can’t. We have to pick our areas.

One of our strong initiatives that will continue in the next few years is called enrollment management. This involves recruitment, enrollment process, retention, student success all the way through. Private colleges have done it for decades, public colleges haven’t been that aggressive. We have a new vice president of enrollment management and have brought together student recruitment, financial aid, registrar, all of that under a single command and control kind of operation. The idea is to be much more aggressive in how we portray ourselves and recruit students. The graduate strategy is much more dependent on the departments. We don’t have much of a central support strategy, and that’s something we need to get into.

Dr. Bayoumi: Another point is the international presence. You find many American universities have campuses overseas.

Dr. Savoie: We have been reading about that, and it’s really a mixed bag of results. Some schools put a lot of money into establishing partnerships, and are now pulling back. I think it’s because the competition in some of these other countries is strong. For sure we would like to have effective presence internationally in an efficient way for all parties.

Dr. Bayoumi: Of course, we cannot afford to build a campus somewhere else. But, developing some partnership with international schools proved to be effective and efficient. As a matter of fact, some of us are doing it, but, we would like to get more university support. We could discuss and come up with a framework. We can do partnerships in granting two degrees for both: Undergradu-
ate and graduate. A student will stay some time in his/her home country, and the rest at UL. At the end get two masters. One from here, one from there.

**Dr. Savoie:** There’s a delegation from two Chinese universities, in engineering, they were working on an agreement much like you’re talking about. Numbers of students, 20 or 25, spend a year at one university, and a year at another. Back and forth. So yes, that’s a good approach. Again, I am very supportive of such initiatives.

**Dr. Bayoumi:** Would you be willing to travel and go to these international universities?

**Dr Savoie:** Sure. We can certainly do it. We have some growing relationships in Canada and South America. I think it’s a viable strategy. I think it will come from personal relationships.

We have several summer programs in Austria, France, Germany, Mexico, Italy. I was scheduled to try to do that this year but the budget started. I would have much rather been in Paris than Baton Rouge.

Another area that will help at the international scene is distance learning, which has been growing in the domestic scene. We are, frankly, not where we need to be with that. One of the new additions we have is director of distance learning. We’re going to get into that in a heavier way. That presents an international opportunity as well. But you have to have the relationships and confidence levels.

**Jamie:** My next question is, CACS and computer science set up a list of strategic goals to keep us on the competitive edge. How can the university help us keep ahead of other universities?

**Dr. Savoie:** By providing the right kind of support and the right kinds of investments. We can’t invest in everything, we will prioritize, and if we have a legitimate chance of success we will make selective investments.

We’re going to have to invest in targeted areas, and, frankly, let some other things go by the wayside because you can’t sustain quality with trying to maintain everything. You also can’t sit back and let these budget challenges lead you to mediocrity. We have to use our resources well. We’ll do that by focusing: investing in those things with the best chance of return. Computer science has been and continues to be one of our lead assets.

**Dr. Bayoumi:** 60% of our junior faculty have got (an) NSF career. This is our caliber in young faculty. When we recruit, I compete with many other universities. There’s a lot of concern because of lack of resources. When we started, we were much further ahead of many computer science programs. To keep that edge nationally we have to do a lot of work.

**Dr. Savoie:** You are right. But, in general, the same financial situation is happening at many universities across the country. The market is going to be somewhat moderated by everyone else’s difficulties. We have to try to stay as competitive as we can. That will be different than it was, and the market itself is going to adjust to some degree.

Computer Science, Engineering, Nursing, those are all expensive fields. If you want to play, and we’re playing in all of them, you have to do the best you can with what you have.

We’re in a better position than most institutions to weather this storm. Another thing, the pendulum of economic conditions will go through downturns and it swings back. Good years, we’ve had 10-12 very good years. And we’re just going back in that other area. When the pendulum swings back, they’ll see we’ve already run a couple of blocks.

**Dr. Bayoumi:** People have confidence that the universi-
ty will be able to survive. Since you were commissioner of higher education for 12 years, that’s a long tenure. You survived three governors, this makes people have confidence. How will this impact UL?

Dr. Savioie: Hopefully there will be benefits. I had the opportunity to work with every institution in the state. I understand their strengths and weaknesses. I see what they’ve done well and not so well. I hope to emulate the success and avoid the failures as best we can. I’m hoping that experience and those lessons learned can be applied in these critical times.

Dr. Bayoumi: We have a problem in Louisiana; we don’t know how to present our success. We need a campaign for image enhancement. We were ranked in the top 50% in IT in higher education. Top 10 in improvement in higher education. We should really show these things to reflect the real image.

Dr. Savioie: The editor of the Advocate said if people expect you to do the right things and good things, you’re supposed to be doing that. That’s not news. If something goes wrong, that’s news. That’s a hell of an attitude. What happens is, if all people see are the negative things, they lose confidence because they don’t know the positive. I never could get her to understand that. I made thousands of presentations. What we’re doing here, we brought in a firm from Chicago that is a national leader in university market position. It’s a two year process, and we’re working on brand, market niche, new ways to get the message out. We’re cutting back, but investing in university image. We’ve brought in industry leaders. In the next few months, you should see good campaign things coming out.

Jamie: We’re very proud that you are from Lafayette. The community of Lafayette looks up to you. We’re wondering what you might say to the youth of Acadiana about your experience and your influence for the youth.

Dr. Savioie: Education is really the great emancipator. It can relieve you of whatever burden you may have by birth, family, or income. It doesn’t give you anything but opportunities. It’s kind of trite, but true. People ought to pursue their goals and do what it takes to give them the opportunity to take advantage of chances coming their way. I think that I was lucky that I never planned my career. That’s not what the gurus tell you. You should have all these benchmarks. It didn’t work for me. I wanted to be a high school history teacher. And I got a call one day to come here, if I’d be interested in working in student personnel. I did that. Alumni association had an opening, I did that. I moved into university advancement.

I used to do government relations for the university. Representing the university, my responsibility was the Acadiana area legislative delegation. So I’d visit with them. One of them was a senator from Franklin, Mike Foster. He wasn’t all that involved with education, though he always supported it. When he was elected governor, he asked me to serve on his transition team for higher education. He didn’t really know anyone in higher ed, and he could depend on me. We started doing that work, a small group of us, and the commissioner announced his retirement. The governor elect at the time, said “find me a candidate”. They found one, presented that person to the board, who rejected that person. He said, and pointed at me, “Why don’t you go do that for 2-3 months until we figure out what to do in the long term”. I said ok, it will be interesting. 2-3 months turned into 12 years. I never planned for that. But because I had pursued the educational trails that were necessary when those opportunities opened up, I was available. The message is, pursue your education and the things you’re interested in. Make yourself available to opportunity. That’s not what business gurus tell you, but that’s what happened to me. Just be prepared.

With this, I thought this was so grand scheme. I hadn’t thought about coming back. I did 10 years ago, but I thought I was going to retire where I was. My alma mater, it was too much to pass up. But I had opportunities to go to several other places. Never thought about it. This was a special opportunity. I felt if I don’t take a chance, I’ll regret it.

Mayssaa: You were very involved as a student. We do have the IEEE, we organize social as well as educational activities. How would you encourage students to get involved?

Dr. Savioie: That’s very important. The classroom side will make you technically skilled, but you have to have human skills and social skills. You may or may not get that in the classroom. You can get it from other organiza-
tions and activities. The combination of academic and social skills makes you an educated person. You have a broader basis to respond to situations. All the technology is useless if you don’t understand how to use or take advantage of it, interact, or communicate.

I didn’t get the jobs I got because I had the most academic credentials. I got them because I knew people and had relationships. Relationships drive progress. You have to have the credentials, but if you can’t interact with people you won’t get very far. We’re pursuing through our improvement plan a freshmen seminar mandatory for freshmen. With practical skills like study skills, financial management, career searches and interest inventories, and a service learning component to get students out doing service in the community as a requirement. Students will be exposed to their responsibility to do those sorts of things. Students will be exposed to human beings, some just like them, some much different from them, and learn to do all that. We’re clearly in a global economy and quickly evolving global life that we’ll have to be able to interact with all backgrounds and perspectives. It’s international, and social within our own community. People are the same, but approach things differently.

**Dr. Bayoumi:** How would you address our alumni? Some are here, some all over the world.

**Dr. Savoie:** They can be justifiably proud of being a product of an outstanding program that’s been a world leader in the field. They have contributed to that legacy, and we need them to contribute back so we can continue to make the kind of progress we’ve made in the last 50 years, and the next 50 years, so they can be proud of this legacy. It builds on itself, a venerable foundation that we are determined to keep building, which reflects on them and their future as much as ours.