

## “Student Affairs Talk” • Kris Hodge, Associate Dean of Students • November 19, 2020

**Q: Kris, you were named associate dean of students and director of OCES — the Office of Community and Ethical Standards — really, right as COVID-19 was unfolding and disrupting the University’s entire operations. How interesting and challenging has it been these last nine months, working with folks who — in most cases — you’ve never even met in person?**

HODGE: I’ll definitely say it’s been a challenge. There’s been good and bad to all of this. I’m trying to look at the positive. It’s certainly difficult, not coming from Clemson University or the Clemson Family or another department. Kind of stepping in as an outsider. It’s been a little bit challenging trying to meet my employees in person and the partners I have to work with. I was lucky to be able to meet with Dr. (Chris) Miller and Dr. (George) Smith prior to getting hired. It has presented a few challenges in relationship building. I think things work better in person, but it’s definitely been a positive to be able to work from home during this time because I have a teenage daughter who is also home. So that’s definitely a positive. OCES can and really has been operating very effectively while we’ve all been remote. I know we can’t say that for all the other departments at Clemson. But we’ve been able to conduct all of our meetings over Zoom or whatever technology you want to choose. It’s been kind of seamless, so we’re fortunate in that respect.

**Q: You came to Clemson with a background in law, but more specifically in prosecuting sexual assault, sexual abuse and violent crimes. In your hiring press release, you said you were confident your skills and prior experience would be able to translate effectively to student conduct. From what you’ve seen so far, has that proven to be the case?**

HODGE: I think so. Not coming from the academic world at all, there are definitely some skill sets I had as a prosecutor that translate to a conduct position. I’m not sure it would have for another position, but it seemed kind of like a natural fit when I thought about it. When prosecuting cases, or being part of the prosecution team, you’re also part of a judicial system. That’s really more what OCES is — working through what a case should look like from start to finish,

what the due process steps are, what to communicate to parties, trying to be fair and impartial — all of those things translated well. And certainly being experienced with ‘touchy’ topics. Not everything you see in OCES is a sex crime or something along that line. There are a few of those and unfortunately, yes, those are difficult cases to work through. But it’s good to have the foundation that I have and hopefully I’m not nervous about those types of things. I’m used to that.

**Q: Let’s take listeners deeper into your role with the 13th Circuit Solicitor’s Office. You worked in Greenville and Pickens counties, so describe your responsibility within that office.**

HODGE: The 13th circuit is made up of Pickens and Greenville counties. I primarily worked in the Greenville office. We did have some dual jurisdiction and handled some cases in the Greenville office from Pickens County. I started as a baby lawyer, as we like to say. I did a clerk shift for a judge right out of Law School in the 8th circuit, which is Abbeville, Laurens and Newberry counties. From there, I got the bug of wanting to be a prosecutor. I wasn’t sure what I really wanted to do with law. But once I was in the courtroom and saw it all, the opportunity to fight for something bigger was very appealing to me. I interviewed with the Greenville solicitor’s office and ended up being there for 25 years. I started off prosecuting minor things such as auto break-ins and things like that. Quickly, I was given much more serious cases. To others, that might not seem like a good thing. But in the prosecution world, it is. When it’s a more serious case, you see it as gaining approval or recognition for your work. For the last 10 years I was there, I headed up our sexual assault and crimes against children unit. I had four other lawyers and we all worked about 300 cases a year. We worked with law enforcement, DSS, mental health and medical providers. It was a group, collaborative effort. And then you try the cases. You meet with the victims or survivors — whatever they would like to be called — and you encounter a lot of different people from a lot of different walks of life. You put those puzzle pieces together collected by law enforcement and community partners and you present them in court. You hopefully

prevail, if the evidence is there. That was primarily what we did. It was a lot of hands-on work.

**Q: You described the process of working with a lot of community partners; it would seem like a natural fit for you to move into this type of role at Clemson, where OCES is responsible for communication with a lot of different divisions and units. Is that correct?**

HODGE: Yes, that is correct. There are definitely pieces I thought would translate well into this job. As OCES director, I still communicate with law enforcement on a fairly regular basis. My partners have just changed a little. We have the CARE group, Title IX Office. And if there are other groups of people who are interested or are advisors or represent the complainant or respondent, you still work with those — just like in the legal profession. You have to work with defense attorneys and judges. And of course, in OCES you have the administrative hearing board and chairperson. It really has translated well.

**Q: Twenty-five years as a prosecutor. I’m wondering what was so appealing about the OCES position, when you first heard about it?**

HODGE: It’s kind of a funny story. I wasn’t necessarily looking for the job or anything like that. I loved my job and that’s why I was there for 25 years. I really do believe God had a hand in how all this timed out with COVID and things. Right now, I can tell you that world is really struggling, as far as court and moving cases. It was appealing because it was something that was going to be a little lighter, but not in severity for the students necessarily. What I was working with for the past 10-plus years was really dark; a lot of darkness. Mostly child sex abuse cases, and they are very prevalent, unfortunately. The chair of Clemson’s administrative hearing board was my boss for 12 years. He was the former solicitor for the 13th Circuit and he had been working with Clemson for a couple of years after his retirement. And working through various positions either representing people or being a consultant for the university. He contacted me and said there was a position open, thought I’d be great and that I should apply for it. I went online and read the description and was like, ‘I don’t

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have any of those skills.’ (laughs) And he was like, ‘Yes, you do, just think about it.’ So, we talked through that. That was one thing that just kind of got in my brain. It was a fairly lengthy process. There was some time that I was trying to see if this was right. But, I do believe it was a God thing for me. I thought about it, prayed about it, and the more I worked through it, the more I felt drawn to it. I hoped it would be a good fit for me. And the way the discussions had gone, it sounded like Clemson was trying to take a little different approach to their conduct office. It seemed like the right timing for Clemson, too.

**Q: Earlier, you mentioned Dr. Chris Miller and Dr. George Smith — your immediate supervisor in Student Affairs. Can you detail some of those early conversations between the two, as you outlined expectations both what they were looking for, but also what you expected as an applicant?**

HODGE: I met with Dr. Miller a couple of times. But it’s interesting, when I was with the prosecutor’s office, there were sporadic times — 10 or 15 times over my 25 years — where I was asked to come speak to the football team. It was part of their education before they started their practicing in the fall. And I was talking to them about sexual assault and other things that could potentially snare someone or get them in trouble. Giving kind of an educational talk about that. I did it for the basketball team twice. The last time I did that, Dr. Miller was in there. I got to meet him briefly. Then, when this position came open, Mr. (Robert) Arial — the former solicitor — said I would have to meet with Dr. Miller. He reached out; we had a couple of meetings in person and he explained to me how the Code of Conduct was changing through the university, how the process was starting to change. That definitely intrigued me, because it was becoming more like what I was used to. And I felt like I could be an asset in that transition piece, because I was going to be familiar with the due process changes and how the entire office was going to operate. As far as hearings go; not on a day-to-day basis. But when it comes to Level 1 type cases. As anyone who’s ever known him or heard him speak, he’s just got that comforting tone, very positive, very supportive. If he ever decides to go sell cars, or insurance,

I’m buying (laughs). After the meeting, I was thinking it was going to be great. I got to meet with George, pre-COVID of course. His persona is really laid back. I researched before I met them, read all about both of them and was really impressed with how Dr. Smith started from the bottom and worked his way up through the university. I thought to myself, ‘Wow, what a base of knowledge he’s got from the ground up.’ If there’s one thing I do feel is a negative for me, I don’t have that in this job. I had it in my previous job, the boots on the ground and you work your way up. I was really happy to be able to work with him, because I figured if I had a question he surely would know the answer.

**Q: And I’m guessing — being new to the academic side of things — you probably had a lot of questions. I’m imagining a pretty steep learning curve. What would you say over the past nine months the biggest part of the learning curve has been for you?**

HODGE: The biggest part is so simple. It’s if I needed to answer a question or my employees had a question, where would I need to go? We need copier paper. Okay, who do I call? And being remote has certainly been difficult, too. Because there are probably places you can walk to and talk to someone. But now, meetings are very purposeful and I have a checklist. Who do I talk to about paychecks? How do I fill out a time card? That kind of stuff has really been challenging, but I have incredible help in my office. And of course, if I have a bigger question, Dr. Smith is there. But people in the OCES office who’ve been there a while, like Laura Clay and Cindi Gosnell, they are a wealth of knowledge and have helped me through that. That’s probably the biggest issue I’ve had. And then, of course, learning and getting relationships with my community partners from afar. So, that’s been a little bit challenging. They’ve all been great, too. Thank the lord for Zoom, because I don’t know what we would be doing if we didn’t have technology in this day and age.

**Q: You talked a little bit about how Clemson’s conduct adjudication process has changed. So now, in its current evolution, how do you best explain cases that involve suspension or expulsion? More of the Level 1 offenses? How does that process work now, as opposed to what you previously understood about it?**

HODGE: Again, this is another great reason the timing has really worked well for me. There was a Student Code of Conduct was amended in January of 2020. Right before I got here. And they did away with the hearing board for Level 1 cases. Level 1 cases can be any offense, but it’s got to be egregious enough that you could be suspended or expelled from school. Obviously, not all offenses rise to the Level 1 status. But if it does, that’s where the university does a full investigation and you have a hearing. My understanding with the old code was the board was made up of faculty, staff and students. And there would be a mixture of representation on those. The investigator was someone internally who worked for the university as well. I really feel like, with Title IX federal regulations in the works, there was talk about how those would look when they finally came out — which was August 2020. Clemson was good about getting ahead of the curve and really changing their Code for Level 1 cases to match what they saw coming down the road. So the university wasn’t suddenly blindsided. They modeled the Level 1 administrative hearing process after the Title IX section.

Now, to answer your question, if a student is advised their offense or charge rises to Level 1, Clemson has hired investigators who are contract workers. They do not work for the university; it’s not part of a university job. They are all attorneys. They investigate the case and present the information. They don’t make findings or suggestions or recommendations. They present the information to the hearing board, which now consists of retired judges. They have been circuit court judges, family court judges and a probate court judge. It’s been a bonus for Clemson, because it’s where Title IX was going. Separate from the university, so that any appearance of impropriety would not be there. There’s not some, ‘Oh these people all work for Clemson, so they’re gonna do what’s

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best for Clemson.’ That’s not the scenario we have now. So, I think it’s a good move.

**Q: Speaking of the Code of Conduct, over the summer we included revisions related to health and safety. In this case, a global pandemic such as COVID-19 that we were all going through together. By and large, it seems like Clemson’s conduct numbers specifically related to wearing face coverings, observing social distancing guidelines and things like that have been very minimal this semester. Is that how you see it as well?**

HODGE: Yes. I didn’t know what to expect. I don’t know that anyone in the country knew quite what to expect. I’ve been pleasantly surprised that we’ve had very few violations. And when you hear the explanations, you can understand why someone was cited. I’m really happy we have not had to take any serious conduct measures against anyone. Reminders, warnings and those types of things have been good. You’ve got on-campus and off-campus things. I’m really impressed, and not only with those things we have been monitoring. But we were also tasked with if students weren’t getting tested. That has become a conduct case. Very pleased that we’ve hardly had any of those. Students have been complying, doing what they’re supposed to do. We understand it’s a heavy burden on them this semester. I actually had a conversation with a cohort or partner at USC, and she was asking me what we were doing with those kinds of things. I told her we didn’t have that many. She was like, ‘What are y’all doing? What’s happening there? How can we do what you’re doing?’ It’s not on us; it’s on the students.

**Q: In your short time with us, what have you discovered to be some of the misconceptions about OCES or the work your team does for the university?**

HODGE: This hasn’t come from students. More from me getting background information from other employees. They think we’re fun-killers, party-crashers. That we’re just out to punish them for doing wrong. That’s what I’ve heard that can be the misconception about OCES. That we don’t understand what college life is like. It’s in our mission statement, and our process is to be educational and not punitive. When we do

have to get involved, it’s because we want the best for the student. Any of the partners I’ve worked with, that’s what bleeds through all of their work. It’s not to punish someone, but to say, ‘This might not be a good choice for you. And here’s why: if you take this down the road, you could really be hampering yourself, your career and your relationships.’ I would hope that they see it that way. It’s kind of like when your parents say, ‘It hurts me more than it hurts you’ to discipline or punish you. It’s really done out of a caring place, and not trying to be a disciplinarian.

**Q: Who are some of the folks around you in OCES on a daily basis that have helped you in terms of case management, incident reports or just adjudication procedures? Who have been unsung heroes during your first few months?**

HODGE: Oh, my entire office. We are very small and each person is essential. They’ve been amazing. We have Laura Clay and Cindi Gosnell. Tony Whaley is a hearing officer and Mary Montgomery is our residential conduct officer. And then we have a graduate assistant, Abby Dill. I could not do without one of them. That’s the skeleton crew we’re working with. Mary does all residential life conduct and that’s voluminous. Tony, pretty much anything else lands on his shoulders. He meets with students, investigates and does what’s appropriate. Abby runs our Tiger STEPS program. When COVID hit, she created the online version of the program. She’s a God-send. It’s been so good. But you’d have to go to an actual class and sit there for three hours; someone would have to proctor the class. It’s really streamlined that for students as well. At one point, we had 600 cases in Tiger STEPS. She’s doing a lot of administrative stuff, and she’s just a graduate assistant. Laura is my right-hand man and I could not do without her. Cindi just came over when I came in, and she’s been great. She volunteered to do some case management for isolation and quarantine, so she’s been doing double-duty. I can’t say enough good things about them. They have been so kind to me, and so gracious when I have stupid questions or I ask them to explain it to me. It’s been good.

**Q: Clemson was in the news recently. We had a survivor sit-in that lasted a little over a week with a group known as Clemson Students for Survivors. They’re wonderful student leaders who are very passionate about the work they’re doing. What do you make of their recent efforts to bring sexual misconduct and interpersonal violence awareness to the forefront for the campus community?**

HODGE: Absolutely. I’m all about education and awareness. You would think in this day and time, people do understand. But there are misconceptions about those types of crimes. I think it’s great when you have a group of students who can do that, who can make someone think or look further into it and be educated about those things. When I was in the prosecutorial world, I did educational talks and worked with our community partners at the Julie Valentine Center and would be on boards and panels to bring awareness. Sadly, we’re not going to completely wipe out these types of behaviors in the world. So, educating people about what is and what isn’t, what they can and should do, reporting it or not — I commend them for doing that. We need to be doing that, even if we know about it. We need to be reminded to not slip back to times where we didn’t take it as seriously.

**Q: When you do find spare time, what types of things do you enjoy doing?**

HODGE: Well, as a teenager, my daughter doesn’t enjoy doing things with me (laughs). But, there was a time we enjoyed things together. She doesn’t drive yet, so we’re still doing some stuff together. For me, I’m a working mom. I’ve always enjoyed exercising as a mental health break. I’ve taught group fitness classes for about 30 years and I’m scared to stop. That is my outlet, probably. I love to travel. If I had all the money in the world, I would not be in one spot. I try to work in a trip here or there. I was fortunate my father was a pilot for American Airlines, and he just retired. We had the benefit of being able to go a lot of places and do a lot of stuff. I kind of caught that bug; I’ve got a whole list of places to go.

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**Q: What’s the coolest place you’ve ever traveled to?**

HODGE: My favorite place, I would say, would have to be Greece. The coolest place I ever went was New Zealand. It was really so much variety of things to see and a neat culture, too.

**Q: I want to end on a fun note. You graduated from the University of South Carolina in 1991. For full disclosure, you are far from the first staff member at this university to graduate from USC. Have you caught any grief for it, or have we made any inroads in converting you to the orange and purple?**

HODGE: I not only went undergrad, but I also went to Law School at USC as well, so they got seven years of my life. Even though the football team stinks, I’m still a Gamecock. I can’t help it. But, I met President Clements during one of my meetings. I came into his office and had a little fun joke that I was recording it for all of my USC people. He’s so funny and nice. At the end, he said he had something for me. He handed me a Tiger lapel pin. He said I’d be wearing orange. I said, ‘Never. But I might wear purple.’ I thought that was fun. That’s all in good fun. Clemson has been great for me; you’re not the terrible, mean old’ nasty Tigers. We had a meeting in Student Affairs and were asked to wear a favorite hat. And I wore a Carolina baseball hat on, but nobody said anything. I was expecting some barbs, but everyone was really nice. They probably said it behind my back; not to my face (laughs).