VR is the Assistant Dean of Students for the University of Mississippi. Her specialties are multicultural affairs and volunteer services.

VR discusses her early exposure to practices and performances by the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir, which took place in the early 1990s. She cannot remember the first time she heard the gospel choir, but she is sure that she was “elated” to hear them. She cannot remember anything about the quality of their performance.

VR remembers the commitment of a core group of choir members in the early 1990s, particularly the choir director and a few of the students. One of those students currently holds a professional position with the university.

From her first encounters with the gospel choir, VR enjoyed the type of music the gospel choir performed.

VR discusses the process of becoming the gospel choir's adviser, which was a result of her involvement with the Black Student Union. She describes her coming to work with the gospel choir (then a part of the Black Student Union called the Black Student Union Gospel Choir), as a “natural progression” from her involvement with the Black Student Union. She cannot remember specifically how her role as adviser became formal, but it resulted from her familiarity with officers in the Black Student Union.
Student Union. At the time, the choir director was an officer for the Executive Council of the Black Student Union.

03:49 VR considers herself to be the first adviser of the gospel choir since it separated from the Black Student Union. She facilitated a board agenda item succeeded in changing the name of the choir to the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir during her initial tenure as adviser. She is unsure as to whether or not the role as formal adviser to the gospel choir (apart from the position as adviser to the Black Student Union) existed prior to her arrival.

04:45 VR discusses changing the name of the choir. The name change was primarily financially motivated. During its association with the Black Student Union, the gospel choir could not apply for university funding apart from the Black Student Union. In other words, it had to share funds with the other projects of the Black Student Union. The name change enabled separate applications for grants.

05:58 During discussions of the name change, the possibility of including the university's name in the gospel choir's title appealed to VR. While she saw it as a “natural good thing,” some members of the gospel choir raised concerns. They cited the choir's historical association the Black Student Union and wondered about the potential advantages and disadvantages of the name change.

06:28 VR learned that—in order to use the university's name—the gospel choir would have to submit an agenda item for approval by the IHL Board. She has tried unsuccessfully to locate record of the board item, which was once stored on a computer in the Vice Chancellor's office. She opines that record of the board item exists somewhere on campus. She worked with Les White, then Executive Assistant to the Chancellor, to craft the verbiage of the board item. The board approved the name change sometime in the early 1990s.

07:18 VR says the name University of Mississippi Gospel Choir just came to her mind naturally as a way to identify the choir since it is made up of University of Mississippi students. She does not remember any other potential names being considered.

08:28 A note from the chancellor's office informed VR and the gospel choir that the name change would require formal approval. She thinks she and Dr. Wyatt met to talk about why the gospel choir should have the university's name attached to it. They discussed the possible benefits of the name.

10:03 VR and Dr. Wyatt discussed the intended public uses of the name and how those uses would impact students. She thinks they also discussed the potential of ambassadorship on the part of the gospel choir. At the time, the gospel choir performed at numerous nearby churches in small black communities. VR saw great potential for recruitment and racial reconciliation in having the university's name included in the gospel choir.

11:54 VR talks about the role of the gospel choir as an ambassador for the university. The choir continues to serve as a means of forging connections for freshman African American students. It is an organization built around the common musical backgrounds of many African American students. A significant number of freshmen who quit the gospel choir over the course of their first year. Overall, many students seem to view the gospel choir as a place to form a “family away from home.” The choir's Grammy nomination, believed to be the first such nomination for a college choir, also serves as positive
publicity for the university. She believes the university has used the choir’s Grammy nomination in promotions.

13:54 The gospel choir also serves to place a group of predominantly African American students in a visible position among the larger community, presenting a positive message about African American involvement in the university.

14:14 VR believes the gospel choir serves as positive representation of African American involvement in the university for both black and white audiences. Specifically, the gospel choir’s performances at small churches in black communities in Tunica, Grenada, and Water Valley touch older members of those churches. The gospel choir has worked successfully with the minister of music at First Baptist Church of Oxford, but VR is unsure as to whether or not the choir performs at many other predominantly white churches. VR says that performing at predominantly white churches.

16:25 VR discusses festivals at which the gospel choir has performed. The choir performs regularly in the annual Mid-South Fair. They have also performed some events at the W, sometimes for Black History Month programming. VR is unsure about where the gospel choir performed while she was away from her advising role. The choir has performed in a program in downtown Jackson, possibly connected with the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday.

17:42 For many years, the gospel choir performed at M.O.S.T. Conferences (a recruitment event directed primarily toward African American high school juniors and seniors).

19:17 VR discusses the means by which the gospel choir chooses which events to attend. Early on, the gospel choir tended to simply attend every event that they were invited to attend, provided they could afford any expenses associated with the trip. Now, the executive board's business manager, who is an undergraduate, presents requests for gospel choir appearances to the executive board each month. The choir prefers advance notice of three to four weeks for appearance requests. For university requests, though, the gospel choir generally has a policy of accepting every request.

20:37 Spring elections determine the membership of the executive board. One practice session per year includes the opportunity for candidates (for positions other than choir leader) to make their case for obtaining their intended positions. A ballot election decides the executive board, and in turn, the executive board names the choir director. The executive board bases its decision on interviews the candidates took part in with the executive board and the adviser as well as a one-song audition.

22:10 Musicians are neither elected nor chosen by the executive board because few musicians are capable of “playing by ear” at the level the gospel choir needs. For this reason, musicians have varied from event to event in recent years.

23:12 Official university events take priority over other invitations in scheduling. Financial considerations also factor into decision-making, particularly if the particular show will be a paid appearance. Additionally, the potential for positive experiences, such as the spring 2010 trip to Chicago to perform at a Rainbow Coalition event, also factors into scheduling.
The Mid-South Fair, M.O.S.T. Conference, the Black History Month Kickoff, the Christmas tree lighting, and a Union Unplugged show for Campus Programming are among the venues in which the gospel choir takes part most years. The gospel choir usually participates in all highly visible events on campus such as the 2008 Presidential Debate.

The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir cultivates relationships with other gospel choirs associated with other schools. Another school's gospel choir might perform at the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir's fall or spring concert, and in turn, the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir will perform at an event hosted by the other school's gospel choir. Some of these relationships are long-standing.

Asked if VR considers the gospel choir's prominent position in many university events is evidence of the gospel choir's importance to the university, VR says she thinks the university “sincerely appreciates the talent...” as well as the students' commitment to the choir regardless of the fact that the choir does not offer financial aid to its members.

VR discusses her duties as adviser to the gospel choir. This year, she has benefited from the help of her graduate assistant, Mignon Chinn. Since returning to her position as adviser around 2003, the gospel choir had about forty members. The next year, the choir grew to almost seventy members. Advising such a large organization presents challenges. Managing academic and student organization responsibilities are among the responsibilities VR takes most seriously. VR's specific responsibilities include financial advising, event advising, ensuring that the gospel choir honors its constitution, managing membership (including enforcement of the choir's minimum grade point average (GPA) standard), advisement for organizational functions (such as celebratory events), and advising individual members.

VR explains her personal interactions with gospel choir members. She functions as a sort of personal adviser to many members as a result of the close association she has with the choir in general. She serves as a chaperone for long trips.

VR explains that paying dues, maintaining a minimum GPA, and attendance of a minimum number of practices and events are the requirements for choir membership. If a student does not meet these requirements, he or she is no longer in good standing with the choir and cannot attend choir events. Practices are open to everyone, members or not, so non-members can attend and even participate in practices.

Financial considerations can factor into who attends various events. For instance, the fee to take part in a particular trip might be waived for those members who have sold a high number of ads. Membership in the choir is open to students regardless of whether or not they can sing well. The gospel choir works with those who cannot sing well to ensure that everyone is included. Sometimes, a member will stand next to an untalented singer and ask him or her to sing a little more quietly. Poor singers can go on gospel choir trips if they have upheld the choir's other standards.

There are some in the choir that can't sing right now, and they probably know it. But it's as much a community for belonging as it is a student organization to go out and sing. There are definitely some people who cannot sing, in the choir.
34:38 VR explains that the gospel choir has a history of enhancing the singing ability of its members, including Preston Echols, a former member who recently sang on BET (Black Entertainment Television) as a member of a successful gospel group.

It is difficult, but there are also some people that have come in who can't sing who are singing by the time they're juniors and seniors because several of the choir members are on scholarship with the department of music, so we've got some choir members who really are talented and who can teach voice. And so you have some choir members who come in—they—I remember one individual specifically who barely moved his lips. I'm like, “He is not singing. He is just there.” But, you know, the fact that the group was a group that made him feel like he had a place was so important, so and—the choir members were like, “We're good. Let him stay.” And what they did was, you know, go and someone sing beside him and help his personality to blossom, which—I think—contributed to him being successful in general. And the young man now—he was just on BET—“Bobby Jones Gospel,” singing with a group that has—that does very well. So, you know, you can learn some skills. I have not. I wish I could sing, but they haven't taught me how to sing yet. But they really do help lots of students.

36:00 VR talks about some of the highlights of her tenure as adviser of the gospel choir. The first highlight was getting to sing in Fulton Chapel. Approximately a year after the gospel choir's name change, the choir performed in the chapel for the first time. Previously, the choir had to sing in a church off-campus and did not have access to such a fine facility on campus. The name change was another memorable moment for VR. Traveling to Indianapolis with the choir to perform at a Baptist church was also memorable because the trip included charter bus transportation, an extended trip, and a hotel stay. Performing for the debate was another highlight, particularly because the choir's performance that day was impressive. The Black Voices program for Black History Month, which featured a survey of the evolution of African American musical traditions, was another memorable event.

38:36 VR says she has difficulty recalling negative performances. She remembers hurtful times, such as losing students in car accidents: “... and the gospel choir does huddle together real closely as a family when that happens...” She wishes the choir's collective GPA were a little higher.

39:23 VR talks about the challenges of being the gospel choir's adviser. Students call and send her text messages throughout the day, every day of the week. Many students see her as a personal adviser for personal and academic concerns.

The number of people and how they look at you as a mother in addition to just being a person on staff because I, traditionally, I don't give my cell phone number out, but so many people have it by now.

40:41 VR says that “balancing the spirituality” of the choir, which is a challenge because the choir consists of members who have varying beliefs and represent multiple denominations. Some feel “called” to minister to their fellow members, which creates problems because the choir is a university organization. Practicing specific religious ideas or rituals (including foot washing and laying on of hands) are not allowed. Reminding students that gospel choir members are prone to missteps is another challenge of her role.
VR talks about balancing denominational differences. She strives to make students, including international students who have belonged to the choir in recent years, feel included in the choir regardless of their beliefs. She has, at times, had to inform students that what they were doing was inappropriate. For instance, preaching during choir practice is not allowed.

I get fussed at. I think sometimes they think my Christianity is, is maybe not as strong or that I'm trying to dampen their, you know, spiritual experience, but I—you know—I just continue to tell them I want them to have a great experience. I want them to be successful students, and it is a difficult place for me to keep that in balance because I could listen to preaching all day. But it's just not—we’re in a multicultural environment. That's just not what you do in that setting. And I do reference, quite a bit, that the gospel choir is a student organization—not a church. And I think the students understand that.

VR says that the choir is composed primarily of Christians. Baptists, members of non-denominational churches, Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), probably a few Methodists, and some international students whose denominations might vary from the aforementioned four denominations.

VR talks about the choir's desire to form quartets or other smaller performing groups because managing such manifestations of the gospel choir would be difficult. She will not allow members to use the university name to designate smaller groups. Rarely, if ever, has the entire gospel choir membership attended an event. She talks a little about CD sales as an adviser, but she was not there during the recording and release of the album. A recent request for the choir to perform on another artist's album proved too difficult and drawn-out to fulfill. VR provides the names of two former gospel choir members for potential interviews.