



Gavin Keulks Interview 2016

Sara Madden: So this is an interview with Gavin Keulks, located in Hamersly Library room 222. The date is October 26th, 2016 and the interviewers are Sara Madden...

JT Mozingo: JT Mozingo

Jameson Collet: Jameson Collet

Jack Nordby: Jack Nordby

SM: So Gavin, when did you start working at Western, and what were the circumstances that led you to come to work at Western?

Gavin Keulks: I began my first term, was the Fall of 1999, when most of you were young. And so this is the middle of the Fall term of my eighteenth year. And the circumstances- I was on the job market like everybody goes on the job market out of grad school. And I was fortunate to have more than one offer, and I had an offer down in Louisiana. And it was a good offer, and it would have been a completely different school, different kind of job, would have been a research position where I only would have taught maybe a course uh, every year or two (I'm sorry) every term or two, and it would have had a higher publication requirement, and, you know, do PhD student work and stuff. But it was in Louisiana (and my wife is Asian) and we agreed that the Pacific Northwest is the better place for our family and ourselves. So yeah, that's how we came out here.

SM: So have you had different positions here? If so what were they?

GK: Yeah. My first ten years on campus I was strictly an English professor. And I taught anywhere- we used to be a three credit program so all professors would teach four classes every term, and then we revised our curriculum into four credits, so then we switched to three classes every term. So I taught extensively in English, and solely in English, and I had, a number of students that loved my classes (you know not to pat myself on the back) but I was just, you know, I really loved what I was doing so I had a number of students that would take me over and over again. There wasn't a single English major that I didn't know personally because I taught some of the core courses that they'd have to pass through. It was a great life, and then in 2007, or 2008 the honors directorship became open. And calls for, you know, self-nominations or other nominations went out and I nominated myself, and, there were a number of other people that went for the position, and I happened to get it. And so, as that started (you know that's a split position) but as the honors program grew, the (you know it's kind of like, it used to be like this [holds hands close together], and then it got like that [moves hands farther apart to signify growth]). So I still teach in English. I do, I still am a member of the member of the English department, I'm a full professor in English, and I publish and do, you know, presentations, but the bulk of my job now is the honors director.

JM: What is the basis for your job at western?

GK: The basis for my job?

JM: Yes, could you give us an example of the kind of work you end up doing on a day to day?

GK: Yeah, I'll do—I'll talk about both positions, because it's kind of weird to have two positions and you know, just ignore the first one, but when I was strictly an English professor my primary responsibility is working with students in the classroom, of course and then we have committees that faculty have to serve on, of course. And then we also publish and we make conference presentations I think students sometimes think we go to a conference and we just hang out with our friends and we don't do anything [general laughter] but—but we have to speak to your [our] colleagues and they happen to be in rooms filled with forty, sometimes fifty, people or fewer if you're lucky, but it's a big deal and then they ask you questions so we're engaged in scholarship and that keeps our classes fresh. In theory it should at least, right? And I was very fortunate when I began. You know, you can't really keep a job at a college without publishing or making those kinds of professional presentations. I hit home runs luckily with publishing. I just got a book published right off the bat and then I didn't—I followed up with an edited collection, had a number of articles, again not doing this [pats himself on the back. Interviewers laughter] it's just what we're supposed to do—it's what we're supposed to do and so that was the basis for my job as an English professor. The honor's position, you know, those haven't disappeared. I'm still supposed to be engaged in that kind of work. Honor's position is totally different. It's administrative and it's a coordinator's position so my job as Honor's Director is to be an advocate for student success and help students move from age 17 (considering colleges) to becoming graduates and moving on and today was really gratifying. Before I came here two of our graduates happened to pop in at the office, so there was a 24 year old young woman and a 26 year old young woman that came to visit me and just let me know what they were doing. One's back on campus working in the bone lab over in the chemistry department. So it's not a relationship that happens to always end neatly with graduation. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't, but that's a totally different thing. I know students for four, four and a half, five years and I get to see them become independent professionals and that's extraordinarily gratifying to me and that's the basis for my job. [Now it's?] almost like a kind of professional parenting in a way, I have to make sure that when they graduate they've got confidence and critical thinking ability and they understand things about being a mature, professional in their field and not like I do classes that teach those life skills, but it's just something that I try and create a program where students befriend each other and they work towards academic excellence and they are proud of what they've done here.

JM: Oh, I've still got a little bit more here [laughs]. And so um—oh I'm sorry no, what is a typical day of work like for you...

GK: A typical work day?

JM: I'm going to go ahead and ask you that one. [laughs]

GK: Yeah, no, that's a good one.

JM: Maybe some of those conferences?

GK: Well I'm a strange individual in that I'm probably still like students truthfully. I've got extraordinary time management skills, but I have to balance that with flex time to make everything work out. I've got young children at home (well [right] now they are in school of course), but one is going to turn five on Halloween and the other one is eight and so that's a stress that I have to balance and of course there's the job and then there are other things that are exogenesis, or outside of that, like my aging mother, perhaps, might fall into that category if she comes to live with us for a while. And so also I don't live here. I have an hour commute to and from here. So, when you mix all this together (and my wife works so--) I have a kind of work day that looks like this: I'm up usually at 7:15 and then the first thing I do (like you all) is check my phone, check my messages [group laughter] and then I get the kids ready for school, feed 'em breakfast, get 'em to school, come here. And then I do the things I have to do here and sometimes its meetings with students, sometimes its meetings with faculty or administrators, sometimes teaching. I do whatever I have to do here then I go get a kid (or both kids) from school and reconvene with my wife and do the dinner thing (there may be taekwondo or soccer in the mix) but then after they go to bed, around eight, from eight to midnight or nine to one I work a half hour—or like a half day. So those four hours are essentially a half day and I do that seven days a week, 365 days—even on Christmas I put in a good—cos that's the only time I can really sit down by myself and get work done. When I am in my office it's an open office. So I might be in the middle of something and somebody walks in. Well that's time I want to give to them, so I need about four hours (a half work day) every day where I can just be me and the computer and so it's a weird schedule. I'll go to bed just like you all, like one o'clock, one-thirty—get up at seven, seven-thirty, whatever. Constantly sleep deprived, trying to make it work, but that's the only way I can make it work with my commute and everything.

JC: What is the most interesting experience you have had while working at Western?

GK: That is an interesting one. Let me think about this, interesting experience huh. I would say, I didn't think about this on too much before. I would say the following. It's hard when you're just starting out as a teacher you don't expect to have students in tears. It doesn't happen a lot, thankfully, I mean students are adults. But invariably someone will get close to graduating, and something happens with their major. There is so much stress, at your age in general, but being a student in general. The interesting experiences that I had, are trying to learn how to listen and support, and also let them see what can be done to fix the problem if anything. There was one young man, he is now working in a bank up in the Portland area, and he was working in the registrar's office here. I don't want to give his name of course, but people who are familiar with that can figure that out. [Phone rings]—I'm just gonna check if this is a school calling, no I'm

just gonna let that ring—he came to at the middle of his senior year. He said “I can’t finish my degree in math, I can’t do it, I’m just tired of it,” and he told me “you need to get me out of here, I don’t care what degree I take, I don’t care what major, I just want out of here.” And so this was like an hour, and he was just in tears, like he was destroyed, and it was so gratifying to me that we were able to come up with a plan that does get him a bachelor’s degree. He finished the honors program, he finished it, and he did a novel that’s about this thick [Indicates thickness of novel with his hand]. What was gratifying about it was I saw him then go back to the person that he was when he wasn’t in crisis. He applied for a job in the registrar’s office, he got it, and it was a salaried real job. He stayed there for four or five years, and chose to leave to go to a banking position. So knowing where he was and seeing where he ended up was very gratifying to me. He wrote me the nicest most heartfelt letter for an awards competition last year, it was just startling in how open and honest it was, like how I changed his life, saved him, and all these things. That’s really interesting and hard to get used to as a professor. Sometimes people come to you and they need help, but we’re not trained to help, we’re trained to write articles on British literature. You know, no one trains us how to console someone who’s got a crisis.

JN: What are your plans and goals at Western now and for the future?

GK: Well that’s a good one, I’m very - you know I’m definitely middle-aged as you can tell from my hair and everything and one of the things that happens when you get older into different decades is you give up the sense of needing to control things. I actually - you know I do control the honors program some elements you know there’s an honors community of course and students are very important the faculty, but a lot of the initiatives and stuff you know I’m the one who has to implement them so I’d be lying if I say I don’t have some control over my life but after a while you give up that need to. If someone wants me to not be honors director that’s ok I’ll go back to teaching in English and if you know if someone calls me from Dublin, Ireland Trinity College Dublin and offers me a job in Dublin I’m going to listen. You know I’m not gonna be going to like OSU or anything like that but there’s six, seven cities in the world that I would love to live in: Vancouver, Dublin, London, whatever, but I’m not seeking them out, I’m not on the job market not going anywhere no plans to, so I guess what I’m saying is, I’m in the water and I’m letting the water take me where I’m supposed to go I’m just kind of floating so I have plans, not to avoid your question. I try not to over plan those aspects, wherever the water takes me is fine. I do believe in Western. I’m not on the job market. I have no plans to go on the job market. I do believe in being in a position that serves students. I would never want to be someone who sits behind a desk that students can’t access. Like sometimes you go to certain offices and you can’t get to the person, the person is way over there and that person books an appointment with someone else. I never want to be remote from students. I love teaching. I think teaching is a vital human work. Especially in the humanities and the liberal arts I think it’s kind of tragic how much the national conversation is centered around STEM fields. The jobs in STEM industries are nowhere near as plentiful as we’re led to believe, and some of them are not great jobs. The jobs in STEM industries are nowhere near as plentiful as we’re led to believe,

and some of them are not great jobs. Just ask a computer science person who's just a programmer all the time, they often get tired of programming and coding they want to do other things like network administration. So, I like talking to students about some of these life lessons and that's something I guess is a plan. I never want to be away from the student experience. I'm happy to continue as honors director and an English professor, and I want to do it here. I believe in the mission of this small campus rather than some big research institution where everyone is just a number.

JN: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experiences working here?

GK: It's been a wonderful 18 years truthfully. The place has changed dramatically. We've got all of these amazing buildings that we didn't have in 1999 or 2000. The wellness center [Health & Wellness Center] alone, this building [Hamersly Library] the library was just being built when I interviewed for this position, and of course we've got other buildings too. Ackerman Hall is an amazing dorm. So, it's been interesting to watch this campus modernize, it used to be kinda like the rural country place. Back in the day no alcohol could be served in Monmouth it was a dry town! Everyone, every single student who was of age and every faculty member would drive to Independence. There was a place called Lenora's Ghost which is next to, used to be next to what is now Mangiare the Italian restaurant right next door. That was the hottest place you could possibly go in terms of just like fun. That's all long gone and of course you have businesses on Main Street [Monmouth, OR] and stuff. So it's been fun to watch this place change and evolve and keep its core mission. I've seen students happy here, I've seen them come here and feel rewarded that they chose this school over a less personal school, so that's something that is really special to me. I don't know... I believe in the mission of the small public liberal arts college. I'm glad we're not private, I'm glad that we don't have a 500-million-dollar endowment. We could do so many great things, don't get me wrong, but it would be a totally different kind of student. We'd have all sorts of trust-fund entitled students, and the faculty too would feel different about our mission. I like the way we're all human beings first here, and then beyond that we can put on the tie and the sport coat but we meet each other as human beings; I think that's really valuable.

SM: And that concludes the interview.

GK: Well that was painless!