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Interview with Dr. Kathy Cassity

2017 November 3rd

HST 301

MC: Okay, this is November third, 2017. This is an interview of Dr. Kathy Cassity for Dr. Swedo's 301 History course. The interviewers are Jacob Frick, Brandon Meredith, and Matthew Capellen. So how are you doing this fine day, Doctor?

KC: I am good. [Laughter] A little chilly.

MC: That's what we get for being in Oregon in November. [giggles] You already looked over the questions, I'm going to begin with the first one.

KC: Okay.

MC: Uh, when did you start working at Western?

KC: August 15, 2017.

MC: What were the circumstances that lead you to come work here?

KC: Um, I had been working as an Assistant Dean at my prior institution, Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu, and I enjoyed the work and was looking for opportunities to expand my administrative skills and um, the opportunities at my then institution were just not there. So I was looking around for different possibilities and saw the ad for WOU's [Western Oregon University] position as Dean, and it sounded like such a match for the kind of things I'm interested in doing. So I threw my hat in the ring and was really pleased to be selected as first a candidate and then a finalist, and then when I came to the campus in March for my campus visit I felt even more that this would be a good place for me. I'm also from the Pacific Northwest originally, I had lived in Hawaii for 25 years but I'm from Seattle, and I always had in mind that someday I would come back to the Northwest. So, everything kind of... happened in such a way to make that possible. And on days like this I will do ask myself why. Because the weather in Hawaii is obviously a little warmer.

MC: Uh, have you had different positions here and if so what were they?

KC: Nope, just one. [laughs]

MC: Just Dean?

KC: Yeah, I just came in as Dean. I had different positions at my prior institution.

MC: What is the basis for your job as Dean here?

KC: Um, my personal basis or the function of the job description?

MC: Uh, your job.

KC: Yeah. My job is to oversee all the programs in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, so I supervise all the faculty through the division chairs and then the department heads, as well as the administrative professional

assistants who assist each division. Um, I advocate for the college's needs at the higher level, try to secure funding and other kinds of support, I participate in the leadership initiatives that the president and the provost develop in terms of continually improving our programs, seeing what we can develop. I think of myself as kind of a professional problem solver. All kinds of problems come to me, not students so much. Those tend to go to the Dean of Student Services, and a lot of smaller issues tend to get resolved at the division level, which is appropriate. But when people hit an impasse, then often I'm called in to try to resolve different kinds of problems.

MC: Well that goes in to the next one of examples, but what's the typical workday like for you?

KC: I'm not sure there is a typical day [laughter] –

MC: -Fair enough-

KC: - They are all very different. Yeah, I usually come in between 8:30 [AM] and 9 [AM]. Sometimes, I start my day with an exercise class at our fitness facility. And I get here, typically check my email, check my calendar, remind myself what's on the agenda for the day, see if any messages are urgent and need to be addressed right away, make sure I'm caught up on all my correspondence and current with where I am supposed to be going. And then after that, it really depends on the day. Every Tuesday I meet with the Liberal Arts and Sciences division chairs to share with them what's going on of importance and to hear their concerns. Every Thursday I meet with the provost, the Education Dean, the associate provost, the grad director, and another leadership group, so we can hear from him what's going on at the higher level. I also regularly meet with the provost every other Thursday individually so that we can discuss issues and then I'm free to meet with him in a less scheduled way, when things come up, as they do. So, there are a few things that are set into my schedule and then... then it's really largely a matter of who is on my calendar, like you folks are on here for today. I have two assistants who help keep my calendar, so faculty can see me for anything from sharing a problem, to requesting resources, to going through budget issues. You know, every day is different. I think that's is one thing that I like about it. People will set up meetings with me and then I do spend a lot of time at

this table discussing, you know. One example: yesterday I met with the registrar and the assistant registrar for about an hour to talk about how we can simplify a process for students. And basically anyone who has an issue they think I can help with, we'll find a time to get on the meeting calendar. So, I noticed the general rhythm of my job is that Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays tend to be the busiest and then a little bit more flexibility on Mondays and Fridays. Which is one reason that you're on my calendar [room chuckles] for today is, Fridays tends to have a little more openness in my schedule because I don't have as many regularly scheduled meetings on those days. So, sometimes I meet in here, sometimes I go to different parts of campus, which I enjoy. Sometimes I am invited to meet with outside groups. For instance, last Friday the history department had hosted a gathering of the Oregon Encyclopedia Board of Directors and they invited me to join them in the Willamette Room for lunch. So, sometimes I have opportunities to do things like that.

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

KC: I haven't been here that long [chuckles], but ... probably a day that stands out was the first day that I had to address the whole faculty. It's like "Hi, I'm your new boss, this is my vision for higher education," and that was September 19th in the Pacific Room, and I still remember that. Over a hundred people turned out and I had to make a speech that was 45 minutes long and then take questions and answers from the assembled people, so that was a fairly high profile day. I had to prepare a lot in advance, preparing a talk and so forth, and we did offer out some coffee and scones and things like that. So that was pretty memorable, that was sort of my first big reveal, I guess, and so for a lot of people it was their, well, first encounter to see who I was, because I came in in the summer when most of the faculty weren't back on campus yet.

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

KC: Well, I just came from a planning meeting this morning with the president and some of the other leadership team across the university, so that was exactly what we were talking about. Some of the initiatives we're working on right now: we're in the process of revising our general education requirements. Probably too late to benefit you all, but [laughter] we're

trying to streamline them and make it probably more interesting as well as easy to navigate gen ed. We're also working on improving our transfer processes, making it easier for students who transfer in from one of the community colleges or one of the other institutions to get their credits transferred in an efficient way. We are trying to streamline a lot of our processes that way. We're doing a lot more to reach out with dual credit opportunities for our high school students. Programs like the Willamette Promise are doing that. We've also been stepping up our internal review of our programs, looking at what's working well as well as what things we could do to improve them, so that is something I'm supervising each division and the process of assisting their programs. So those are all things I'm involved with. And one thing that I'm really interested in doing is helping WOU to do an even better job of getting our stories out there both across campus and externally. So, gathering success stories from our alumni as well as achievements of our students and faculty and finding better ways to publicize them both on campus and to the community around us so that... I think we would all benefit if WOU was on more people's radar screens, we tend to get dwarfed by the by the big boys down the street [room laughs]. So we would like to do a better job of tooting our own horn, so I have been asking division chairs to gather great stories, everything from students to alumni to faculty, so that we can start looking at ways of getting the word out about what we're doing here. There's streamlining and simplifying things so that we can become continually more student friendly as time goes on.

JF: And then, just is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience working here?

KC: I have found it to be a very welcoming place, as I came in as a new person and I got a lot of offers of help, people just dropping in to say hi. I've enjoyed that. It's... I like the size of the campus, it's not that unmanageable gigantic campus with the 400-seat lecture hall. I presume that all of you choose it partly because you were looking for a more personal experience. And one thing that's really struck me about this place is the loyalty that so many students and faculty and staff have to the place. There are a lot of alumni working here, a lot of staff who wear WOU clothes just to go to work. There seems to be a lot of pride in the institution, and I've also really liked ... um... you'd say just the classic kind of architecture and the trees and the foliage., We've had a spectacular fall. I am adjusting to the weather. After living in the tropics [room laughter] for 25 years this is kind of harsh, but at least I was eased into it

because we had a beautiful summer and many beautiful fall days and I enjoyed the foliage. There's great people and a very manageable scale, I think. I like the fact that we can walk from one end of the campus to the other in a relatively short period of time. So, I'm sure as time goes by if you were to ask me these same questions next year, I would have a lot more to say because I'm still learning kind of learning the ropes around here. So, anything else you would like from me?

JF: That's it. What about you guys?

BM: That'll do it.

MC: Thank you very much.