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Rex Fuller Interview 2017

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KM: Keegan McMurry

JB: Joseph Baez

OR: Owen Reutlinger

DG: Daniel Garcia

Interview by: Keegan McMurry, Joseph Baez, Owen Reutlinger, Daniel Garcia, 2017

Transcription by: Keegan McMurry, Joseph Baez, Owen Reutlinger, Daniel Garcia, 2017

Interview with Dr. Rex Fuller



*2017 November 2nd
HST 301*

[Keegan McMurry] So, good morning. Today we are interviewing [Western Oregon] University President Rex Fuller on the 2nd of November, 2017 in his office at Western Oregon University. Those interviewing are Keegan McMurry, Joseph Baez, Owen Reutlinger, and Daniel Garcia. So, I'll be asking the first question: So, when did you start working at Western?

[Rex Fuller] I started on July 1st 2015, that's—and so, that's the first day of my employment here at Western. And that was also the first day that the board of trustees for Western became sort of the governing board. So that was the same day we fully migrated to the new system of governance that was created in the state of Oregon.

[KM] Um, so, yeah, What were the circumstances that led you to come to work at Western?

[RF] I had been a dean of schools of business in a number of different states; I have a PhD in Economics, and we were in the Midwest for a good number of years and wanted to move back to the West where we are from, and so we gradually identified opportunities in the West. I was most recently at Eastern Washington University, and I was the provost there, which is the chief academic officer. In my experience as a dean—was a mix of internal and external, so as a dean you're often times engaged with the outside community, and that's the role the president has as well, and so I looked at this as an opportunity to—do something that I was ready to have a bit of a change of pace.

[KM] Have you had any other positions while you've been here? And if so, what were they?

[RF] Uh, yeah, at Western I came as president, and I have been here since 2015, and am in my third year so I didn't hold any other positions here at Western. But I've mentioned I've been a provost and a dean at three different schools.

[KM] All right, that's it for mine.

[JB] All right. So, what is the basis of your job here at Western?

[RF] The president is the person who's responsible to the Board of Trustees, and so the way the government system works in the state of Oregon is the governor appoints Trustees for each institution—in our case there eleven at large Trustees and then three designated trustees, a student, a staff member and a faculty member; there are fourteen all together. They literally are the, you know, the controlling body if you will for policies and the overall responsible to the university. I report directly to the Board of Trustees, and so they hire and fire presidents; they are responsible for the executive office, and so the president, the chief, chief executive office on campus, then I have vice presidents who report to me; I mentioned the provost, for example, is one of our vice presidents, he reports to me and general counsel reports to me, vice president of finance reports to me, athletic director and so on. So the president really is the person, you know,

who is ultimately accountable to the Board of Trustees, and they're accountable to the governor, and the idea is that we're accountable to the state of Oregon in the process.

[Joseph Baez] All right, would you give us examples of the kinds of work you do?

[RF] Well it's—no day is the same. Today is a good example; I don't have interviews every day, but the work that comes to my desk is highly varied: everything from the one end the opportunity to be part of opening new buildings like the Woodcock Education Center a year ago, the health center this summer, and a dedication this fall. There are board meetings we have to manage. I testified in the State House on issues related to higher education internally. You know all key decisions come across my desk. Oftentimes, they are just for information. And there were times that were looking for a final decision. I manage, if you will, the management process for the bargaining with regard to our unions. If there are lawsuits which happen from time to time, I'm aware of those, and we have a general counsel who assist with that. I get calls from the media when things go well and when things don't go well. So it's--what's exciting about a week to week basis, and there there's really no you know pattern to it. And although I have a calendar every week, there are times when all of a sudden something comes up that will change the calendar, change the focus because of the urgency. Examples of that include some the tragic things we have with regards to student deaths: we've had three student deaths since I've been here, those create a whole set of responsibilities and opportunities for us to come together and do the right thing.

[JB] And I know you said that's there is no, you know, typical kind of day, but, is there—what is a typical workday like for you?

[RF] Typical month would be a better way of looking at it. So I meet weekly with my cabinet, and that's the vice presidents who I mentioned earlier, and there eight of those. We meet in this room, and we go through what are the urgent issues in our respective areas of responsibility. One of the big things we do every year is this: examine the budget and set the budget. The other thing we're engaged in now is implementation of this strategic plan move to, you know, try to have more purposeful decisions related to the overall plan that we developed a year ago. And then

they also bring other items for information, so that there is a cross-walk, if you will, across the different divisions. So if we're doing some facility upgrades: what are we doing, how is it affecting the academics, do we have to change our patterns, do we have to move classes, that's an example. This is homecoming weekend, so we have everything from parking control to people who have guests on campus and that means we have to have people around who can help the guests find their way. So in the spring when we host Cesar Chavez Academy which brings 2000 high school students to campus, that's a big event. So we have events that come up from time to time—so, month to month again that cabinet group meets weekly to keep ourselves, you know, kind of abreast of key things as well identify the agenda. I have individual meetings with the vice president either every two weeks or every week. I meet with the faculty senate every two weeks: those are some of the standard meetings. And then in between all that I try to do the work I need to do to help the university meet its obligations. And then, like I said earlier, we have four Board of Trustees meetings each year. The packet for those board meetings can be in a range of 150 to 200 pages of different things. You know materials. So, for example, the board meeting this month, earlier—well this past month now, just two weeks ago—we included a highlight of our campus master plan process. So this year, we're doing a refresh of our master plan: what should the university look like in terms of facilities now that we have the OMA building, Oregon Military Academy. You know we're going to remodel and repurpose that. What should be in it, you know, what are the services that need to be there, and you've all seen some of the changes in the last two years with the health center and the Woodcock education center. So, those are examples of things that we work on a regular basis.

[Owen Reutlinger] Okay, so what is the most interesting experience you've had while working at Western? You've talked about maybe seeing the facilities come up, or maybe something unexpected happened out of the blue?

[RF] Yeah, it's hard to pick one. I mean, I look forward every year to the State of the University Address, and so I have the opportunity to address the entire campus in thirty to forty minutes of prepared comments. So it gets me a chance to highlight what's been accomplished in the previous year, but also kind of set the stage for what's coming our way; I look forward to that.

Some of the traditions we have on campus are things that I've come to enjoy. The tree lighting this will be the fifteenth anniversary this year on December 1st.

[OR] Cool.

[RF] (I think) on Friday. That brings the whole community together. When I'm in town the 4th of July parade is kind of a highlight of the summertime in a small-town USA with the parade and the university's participation. The opening of the buildings certainly was a joy, and I was lucky to be a part of that and I was really excited to see that happen. I had more to do with the Health Center than the Woodcock Center; Woodcock was well underway when I arrived. The Health Center was something that, you know, I really initiated by asking questions. The original plan was to remodel the old Health Center, and I asked the question what would it take to expand the capacity of the plan to build a new facility, and the students got behind it. We passed, you know, a student fee that will help pay for it, and as a result, I think we have a great facility that will service for, you know, twenty or fifty years as compared to simply a remodel that would have been a shorter term kind of a thing. So those are some interesting things. The really, one of the really most challenging things was, as I mentioned earlier, I started the same day as the Board of Trustees started so we had to build a whole new kind of system of reporting that wasn't in place. And so, that's boring to some [laughter], but someone like me, I find that to be intriguing and challenging.

[DG] You talk about remodeling or repurposing the buildings, what are your plans and goals at Western now and for the future?

[RF] Yeah, the key is implementation of a Strategic Plan. I've brought copies if you haven't seen it, this is—you may have heard about it—at least I hope you have. There's uh, a takeaway for you. It has five different areas of focus, the first being Student Success, and then Academic Excellence, Community Engagement, Accountability, and then Stewardship—and—Sustainability. Then there are sub-levels under each one of those areas. So the most pressing challenge going forward is linking another plans to that, for example, the Campus Master Plan. If we say these are the things we care about, these are our values, these are our initiative: how is the

campus facility fit into that? You know, my first experience was during an interview on campus—actually not true—I came by on a stealth visit, before I was a finalist. I came by campus on Martin Luther King Jr. Day of 2015, and, walked around campus, my wife and I, you know, hanging out and decided to come check it out and nobody knew who we were. I was impressed with the facilities and the campus and just the way people treated each other, and treated us. You know, it was obvious we were asking questions about where things were, and during the interview found that to be true, and since I've been president have found that sense of community to be important—really a trademark of the university, if you will; it's in our DNA, if you will. Part of that is the fact that our space is so welcoming, and so now as we think about, having the OMA building and then the old College of Education buildings vacant, so what do we do with that space? So we need some help with, you know, with what's the vision? You know, what does that look like? And I think that's going to be the key piece of what we look at. So there will be a Campus Masterplan; we've created a new budgeting process, it will be in its second year of operation that ties to the strategic plan. So the way the planning process works, in my mind, is kind of systems thinker. The Strategic Plan is the overarching umbrella, and then you have the number of plans underneath that. They're all management, academic array, academic programs, campus facilities, IT (information technology), all that has to link up to that Strategic Plan, if you're going to make progress. So that's the big challenge we have on campus is getting those initiatives underway so that they start to run seamlessly. And yet, what happens in organizations is that it gets something created, it takes a lot energy, but once you get created and started to sustain that level of activity, [it] takes less energy because it's part of how you do business. And how you operate, so that's the process we're engaged in. That means a lot of change, and change is something that we all do a little differently, so at times it creates a little stress. But I think in the end it will be a better outcome if we—just—hold steady and come back to our values and just ask the questions that is consistent with our plan. And that's why we have it, and that's why—you know—I use it every day or every week at least to decisions I make; I'm saying, "Do they match up with this [The Strategic Plan]?" If they don't then, maybe that's not the decision I need to be making.

[Daniel Garcia] And just the final question to wrap this interview up: is there anything else you'd like to add about your experiences working here?

[RF] Well, I think what's—in my experience—I've worked—so I've had a student, of course, and I was an undergraduate student in the state of California, then my doctoral studies at the University of Utah. And I've worked as an academic in Wisconsin, Colorado, Washington, and now Oregon. In—this campus really does have a greater sense of community and caring than other campuses I've been on. And I think that's important, and that's one of the things I—as president—try to pay attention to, to make sure that that doesn't drift; we don't lose that mark of distinction. Because I think it makes a difference for each of you, as students, because of the way in which you can connect with faculty, and do significant projects. So one of the things that I—I guess most intrigued by is the way in which students, faculty, and staff come together and get connected while they're here, and I think that's a powerful thing.