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Michael Ward Interview 2015

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Michael Ward, Department of Mathematics, Western Oregon University



Dan Struble: Today is the ninth of November, 2015. We are at Western Oregon University in the Math and Nursing Building with Mr. Michael Ward – welcome.

Michael Ward: Thank you.

DS: My name is Daniel Struble, I'm going to be asking just a couple of questions here, so I'm just going to dive right in.

MW: Okay.

DS: So, question one: when did you start working at Western?

MW: So, I came here in the fall quarter of 1997.

DS: Okay, perfect. What were the circumstances that led you to come to work here at Western?

MW: Okay, so I taught for eighteen years before coming here at Bucknell University in Central Pennsylvania, but our family had some special needs that couldn't be met in central Pennsylvania. So, like, from 1993 to 1997 I actually commuted across the country – my family lived in Utah, I worked in Pennsylvania. I commuted for those years while we looked for some place that could meet our family needs and also where I could get a job. This job opened up kind of late in the hiring year and John Minahan – who was the Dean, the Provost, and then the President here, and now he's on the Board of Trustees – he did a lot to make it possible for me to come; as did Leon Roland, who was the head of the Math Department then – he's retired now but he was the head then. So, it was sort of unusual because this job came up in the summer and so I called Bucknell and said: "I have a chance to try out a new job, but I'm not sure I want it; can I have a leave of absence to try out this job?" and, incredibly, they gave me a two-year leave of absence so I didn't have to quit my other job to come here. It was incredibly humane of them and I appreciate it, so that's how I ended up here.

DS: Perfect. Have you worked other positions here, or have you been doing the same thing since you started?

MW: Just different ranks, I was an associate professor for the first two years and then professor since then.

DS: Excellent, excellent. Move on to question two.

Ryan Steele: So what is a typical work day like for you?

MW: Okay, so one of the good things at a small school like Western is that most of the faculty's job is working with students. You know if you're at a bigger university or a research university that's only a portion of your job. But, here it's the main part of your job. So, a typical day is centered around student stuff. Obviously prepping for class, teaching, meeting with students; especially in Math. You know office hours, people come for help. There's grading, more grading in math [Laughter] as Ryan knows it, I have unloaded some of my grading in his class on a grader. And advising students and in the Math Department I think maybe in History they do this too, but in Math every student has to do a senior project and it's a piece of either original research or at least original exposition and we work one-on-one with students. And so that's an activity that's really a lot of pleasure. I've done that with students and we've actually had papers published with students and me in Math journals so that's good. But let's see what else is there. So almost every year since I've been here for one reason or another we've had to hire people in the Math Department so especially like about this time of year part of your day is spent screening applications and later on it's spent interviewing people for jobs here so that's part of it. And then every faculty member has to contribute to the running of the University. So I don't know if you know all the things that go on but there's like a curriculum committee that approves all the

changes in courses or changes in degree requirements that sort of thing and there are several levels of that. There are committees in each Division that review faculty members for retention, that means giving them another contract or promotion to a different rank, and so we have to do that sort of thing. And then there's various committees, like there was a committee that that I was on for like two years that was reviewing the LACCs a while ago, and there just a whole bunch of stuff like that goes on that you do as part of your working day.

Lawson Smith: What was the most interesting event or happening that you've experienced while working at Western?

MW: That's a good one. You know, a geographer told me one time that there's a North African curse that translates, "May you live an interesting life." [Laughter.] So I was trying to think of some things that might be a little out of the ordinary in terms of interesting. So I was thinking back, it was the summer after my second year here, and a department which shall remain nameless decided that they should teach Calculus, and so, they didn't talk to the Math Department but they slipped it through this committee that approves such changes, and suddenly the Math Department wasn't teaching Calculus to these students. [Laughter.] And I was so ticked off that I said, "I am done here. This is it." It was sort of too close to the start of school that I could leave in good conscience, so I contacted my former job and said, "Can I have a third year leave of absence? And then I'm coming back!" And they said, "Okay, but that's it. You're not getting any more." And so I was ready to leave after that year, but my wife said, "No you're not." So that was interesting.

Another interesting thing, you probably don't know, but there used to be a building across the street from the swimming pool, it's just a parking lot now, called Arnold Arms, and that's where the Math Department was located, and it was condemned, it was like the poster child for buildings that were unsafe in the Oregon University System. So they moved us over here when this building got renovated, and anyway, they burned that building down, the fire company burned it as a practice burn, so it was like this big deal, you know everybody's dream, the Math Department burns down! [Laughter.] So that was interesting.

Another interesting thing, this past couple of years, has been attempts to form a Greek System here. I don't know how you guys stand on that issue. I think that's interesting in a bad way. I spent a lot of my career on campuses with an active Greek System and it has very many downsides, and I hope that fails here. I hope Western students have better things to do with their money.

LS: I would agree with that.

MW: [Laughter.] Good for you. Good for you. Anyway. But the other thing that has been interesting about working here that I've really liked a lot is where I used to work a long time ago that was a really exclusive school, you know, hard to get in, and most of those students were very affluent and had lived lives of privilege, and that was way different than me, I was first

generation college student, my siblings and I were the first ones to go to college in our family and farming, and well, my Dad was a carpenter, and, anyway, there's a lot of students like me here, which has made it really nice. So I really am glad I came and made that move. It has been great.

LS: How long did it take them to get Calculus back in the Math Department, if you don't mind me asking?

MW: So, for that group of students it still isn't in the Math Department.

LS: Oh wow.

MW: So we teach Calculus for *most* of the students on campus, but not for that particular group it still isn't. We may be the only real university in the country with that situation, I'm not sure. Never heard of another one.

DS: Further investigation required.

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

MW: Okay, so this is my last quarter, I am retiring.

LS: Congratulations.

DS: Congratulations.

MW: Thank you, thank you. So my plan is to try and successfully finish this quarter. And get as many of the Calc one and Calc two students as possible to successfully finish with me, and then clean out this office, and then move on to something else. I've been working on my file cabinet since September and I have made it through one point five drawers so far [Laughter] so I'm going to have to pick up the pace and get cleaned out so that Scott Beaver can move in here in December. Yup so that's it for me.

LS: All right, well that's pretty much all we have for our questions, thank you for taking the time to meet with us and making it work and going out of your way to schedule this with us, I know it was kind of a hassle getting it all worked out but we really appreciate it.

MW: Okay, well it's been fun thanks.