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Tina Fuchs Interview 2016

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Tina Fuchs, Dean of Students and Judicial Affairs, Western Oregon University



Ashley Fierstadt: This an oral history interview for Western Oregon University. We are interviewing Tina Fuchs on April 28, 2016. We are interviewing in a housing conference room. And the name - and we are - this is Ashley Fierstadt.

Cat Bracken: I'm Cat Bracken.

Nicholas Ham: Nicholas Ham.

Ryan Steele: And Ryan Steele.

AF: All right Tina, when did you start working at Western?

Tina Fuchs: My first day of employment at Western was September 5, 1989, which also happened to be my parents' 30th wedding anniversary. That's how I remember it. [Group laughter].

AF: What were the circumstances that led you to come to work here?

TF: So I graduated from Western Washington University in August of 1989 and was looking for employment that summer. And applied for really three jobs during that time, and this one was one that was referred to me by my former boss when I was a student at Pacific University. She mentioned that this position was open and so I went ahead and applied for the position and I got the job so . . . and the position I applied for, just to be clear, was not a Dean of Students (that's not something I would get right out of grad school - let me just tell you that right now), was the Assistant Director of Housing and Residence Life. (I wonder if I should look at the camera or look at you?)

RS: Doesn't matter.

TF: Okay, all right. I'll just look around.

AF: And what did you, what did you study at Western?

TF: Oh right, good question. My Master's Degree is in Student Personnel Administration in Higher Education so it's a program specifically designed to prepare people to be administrators in student affairs types of positions.

RS: So what is the basis for your job at Western?

TF: The basis for my job at Western? So during that time I've been at Western my position has changed quite a bit. If you do the math I've been here for almost 27 years. So I started as an Assistant Director, moved on to be Director of Res [Residence] Life, and then Director of Housing and Residence Life, and then the Dean of Students and that's the position I hold today. And with that I manage the housing program here, Housing and Residence Life Program, as well as Student Conduct Program. So that's kind of the basis of what I do. Yeah.

RS: Ok and what is the typical workday like for you?

TF: I was thinking about that and actually went back into my calendar to kind of take a look and see if there was a typical work day and in my work there is not a typical work day. My work day is filled with a lot of meetings, as you could imagine. And I remember being a student and watching administrators go to meetings and thought, “why would I do that?” and I can’t believe I’m sitting in a situation where I do that pretty regularly, but what’s great about it, while my day isn’t typical what is typical is that I meet with a variety of people everyday. Mostly students, but I do meet with on occasion I meet with faculty and staff and certainly a lot of my own staff I meet with on a regular basis. And kind of sprinkled in there are meetings with students related to student misconduct. Which, when I tell people what I do they somewhat apologetically “Gosh, you know, I’m sorry that’s the kind of work you do”, and quite frankly I think it’s one of the really one of the coolest parts of my job because I get to meet with students that I otherwise wouldn’t normally interact with. And I would say 90 plus percent of the time, the students that I’m meeting with are coming in and really just wanting to learn in that process, and we generally have very positive conversations so it's actually kind of cool to watch a student learn in the course of an half hour about their behavior and wanting to be a more positive community member. So, it’s kind of, I kind of like it, yeah.

CB: I know it must be difficult, in your twenty-seven years here, but can you think of some interesting experiences that you’ve had here at Western?

TF: Well, I’ve had a lot of interesting experiences [Group laughter].

CB: I’m sure you’ve had very many.

TF: Well you know from attending pretty wacky programs to super high-level meetings, I mean, I’ve been able to experience a lot. Interacting with faculty and staff, and the community . . . I think for me, when I looked at that question and I was reflecting on my time at Western, there was a four month window of time, back in 2009, where Dr. Dukes went on a Semester at Sea trip. Where he . . . it’s basically college on a ship, and he’d always wanted to do it. And he served as the Director of Student Life on the ship. But while he was gone, he asked me to fill in in his position for those four months. So, what was cool about that is it put me in a position

where I got to see so much more of how the institution operates. I sat on the President's Cabinet, I interacted with higher-level folks, folks at the Chancellor's Office. During that time, we had our . . . none of you were probably here in 1989 -- I mean 2009, . . . and certainly not 1989 either, I can imagine [Group laughter]. But, in 2009 we had a Swine Flu outbreak. Yeah. So, that happened about two weeks before Dr. Dukes got back. And so we had to close campus, we had to notify all of our students, and in particular the students that were in the class where the student who initially got the diagnosis. And so we were doing a lot of outreach and a lot of planning on how we manage this and how we keep students safe and prevent them from maybe infecting others. And it was -- it was one of those experiences that you probably never want to have again, but the way the whole team came together to work on that was really cool. At the President's level, and then just within our own staffs, being able to manage that was one of those things. Like I said, you never want to go through it again, but it was very interesting at the time. So, I would say during that four months, I learned so much about the University, even though I had been here for 20 years, I hadn't seen it at that level and so that made it kind of a new and unique experience for me.

CB: How was your job different [from] Dr. Duke's, like in terms of just 'cause you, for those four months, you had all of his roles? How were they different than your roles that you were doing previously at the time?

TF: So Dr. Dukes manages the entire Division of Student Affairs. So I was actually supervising my colleagues during that four month window, and I was learning a lot about the details of all of the areas in Student Affairs, like Student Leadership and Activities and the Health Center, and Student Enrichment Program and Upward Bound . . . all of those areas. And so, for Dr. Dukes, he's managing all of that; I only managed two smaller areas in his division. So it gave me a much broader view of student affairs, and that's what Dr. Dukes does. Yeah. Did that answer your question?

CB: Yeah, it did. What would you say is the thing you learned the most from having that four-month window of being Dr. Dukes?

TF: What did I learn the most? Ah! There's so much I learned. I think the thing that struck me the most, that I took away from that experience, is the working relationships at all of the levels at the university, because I think sometimes you think about the university as being all of these silos, when really in general what we are trying to do is all work together. And that became very apparent to me, during that four months, is that the cabinet that works with the President really do work together to provide the best experience they can for our students and our faculty and staff. So I would say that's what I took away from that experience.

NH: What are your plans and goals for Western now and in the future?

TF: Retire? No. [Group laughs] You know it's funny, I saw a friend of mine two days ago who was on the hiring committee at Western, when I first came to Western, he was on my hiring committee, and he's now at Portland Community College, and we were talking (because we both started professionally about the same time) and he was talking about "You know, when I turn 56 I am retiring, I am out of here". And I said, "You know, I think I want to keep doing this until I feel like I can't make an impact anymore", and I don't know what that looks like. I don't know what that looks like four years from now when I am 56, and I've been here 30 years, or 10 years from now, I don't really know, but I do know that there are things that I want to do, and if you could have asked me in 1989 (you couldn't have, in 1989) [Group laughs], but if you had asked me in 1989 if I would be at Western my entire career, I would have said no way. Because my intent was to be here three to five years and then move on to a larger school, and about every three to five years my job has changed in some way to make it more interesting and more unique. And so, here I am 27 years later and I think Western could be my career, it could be where I spend the rest of my career, I think before I leave I want to position our University Housing program in a way that it is on track for our long term goals, and by that we did a kind of housing long term plan of removing some buildings and putting some new buildings up that are more sustainable and more inclusive in their design, and I want to make sure that our program is on track for that from a planning standpoint and also financially. And there is work to be done there before that can happen, but it's not about my vision, it's about the vision that students have helped us create and so I want to help make sure that that's solid before I leave. I have had opportunities in the past to leave, but I haven't wanted to leave. The students here, you know,

people have asked me “Why, why are you still at Western?” and students here at Western remind me a lot of who I was as a student. I was a first generation college student, I went to college not knowing a lot, but I relied so much on the resources on campus to help me be successful, and I feel like that is what the experience has been for many of our students at Western, and that is what has kept me here. So, I have some vision about what I would like to see happen, and I have some things I kind of want to get in place before I decide that it is time for me to move on or retire, or whatever.

NH: Is there anything else you’d want to add about your experience working here?

TF: You know, it is interesting, I think about how much Western has grown since I started at Western in 1989, and I think what’s funny and kind of keeps me in this reality check mode is that I’ll hire staff, staff who, you know, have maybe been here three to five years and are less content with how things are at Western, in terms of, like diversity would be an example. Where I see how far we’ve come since 1989 and then these staff that come in are like “Oh my gosh, Western, we’re not doing enough to be more inclusive, and to be more sustainable in our initiatives”. And so what helps me and keeps me grounded are those perspectives, because I could easily just sit here and just look through my little blinders, right, “Oh, we’re doing great”, but I’ve got people around me who are challenging what I would call the status quo and bringing reality to my daily work, right. So, I think if there’s anything else I’d want to talk to you about it’s that piece, it’s about the diversity that I’ve seen change over time at Western that has been pretty impressive, but still, we still have so much work to do around that, yeah.

NH: And that probably ties in directly to that contentment factor that you were talking about how, you know, wanting to maybe move on, but then it changes enough that it’s keeping you staying... [inaudible].

TF: Yes.

CB: How has it changed in like sustainability and diversity since 1989? [All laugh] I’m sure I have plenty of things. [All laugh].

TF: Let me, I'll start with the diversity piece, because that is the one that is most familiar to me. So, I identify as a lesbian, and when I came to Western it was not a topic of discussion, at all, and in fact it was frowned upon by the Cabinet, by so many administrators, and to some degree some faculty. And so, that required somewhat of a closeted approach, especially in the work that I did. There were very few of us that connected with each other, and this is just one component of diversity. I'm just going to share with you my personal experience. And it wasn't until, gosh I want to say, toward the end of the 1990s that we had a student grassroots effort to start addressing issues for LGBTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer] students on campus, and it was because of the students that change started to happen. And, the leadership on campus started taking notice of what they needed to be doing for students, faculty, and staff that identified as LGBTQ, and so, to me, there has been a tremendous shift in that area and a much more accepting perspective that we didn't have in 1989 to 1999. And it really stemmed from the Matthew Shepard incident in Wyoming where the student was attacked and essentially killed in Wyoming, [he] was left in the middle of nowhere by these two people who attacked this guy. Anyway, that prompted this grassroots effort from our students to do something different, and to address these issues of discrimination on our campus. And it was from there that things started to grow and change and shift and to me that is something that has substantially changed on our campus. If you had asked me if we'd had a Stonewall Center, or a women's resource center, or a Safe Zone in 1989 I would have said that there is no way that that would have happened at Western, but it has happened, and that's one example of the changing dynamics on our campus because of what students have done to make that happen. So, to me, that has been significant.

In terms of sustainability, I think that that is a mindset that again, I think was prompted by students on campus who had the experience, right, of being more sustainable in their high schools, learning about sustainability practices, and implementing those coming here. And so, there's been a huge shift in that regard too, on our campus from our facilities, to our dining, we've made some changes to our environment, and I think that's important.

Other questions?

RS: I think that's it. Thank you for your time.

TF: You're welcome. All right, no problem, thank you.