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David McDonald Interview 2016

Alyssa Layton

Western Oregon University, alayton11@wou.edu

John Mozingo

Western Oregon University, jmozingo12@wou.edu

Jennifer V. Hight

Western Oregon University, jhight11@mail.wou.edu

Samantha Jones

Western Oregon University, sajones12@wou.edu

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David McDonald, Associate Provost, Western Oregon University



Alyssa Layton: This is an interview with Associate Provost David McDonald. The date is April 29th, 2016. The interviewers for Oral History are Alyssa Layton, John Mozingo, Jen Hight, and Samantha Jones.

We would like start off with, when did you start working at Western Oregon?

David McDonald: I started at working at Western Oregon September of 1999 and so, I'm sorry I'll try that again. I started working at Western Oregon University September 2004. I had been working prior to that at the Chancellor's office and so I have been on this campus for 11 years.

AL: Where did you originally start at?

DM: So, I started my higher ed career at the University of California Irvine. Then I moved to UC San Diego, and then from there I moved back to Oregon. I am an Oregon native as is my wife. We moved back here in 1999, I took at job at the Oregon University system Chancellor's office. The Chancellor's office no longer exists and I was able to leave that job before the Chancellor's office ceased in its existence.

AL: And what was the reasoning behind coming to Western Oregon?

DM: I had such wonderful experiences on campuses in California and almost immediately upon taking the job at the Chancellor's office in Eugene I realized that was a bad career choice for me. I missed working with students, I missed working with faculty, I missed working with other administrators and staff, really looking at and working with students. At the Chancellor's office my primary conversation and work were with legislators, the governor's office, and university administrators. Rarely with students and only remotely concerned with students, so coming back to a campus became a priority to me very quickly. And I had the opportunity in 2004 under President [John] Minahan to come to Western and it has been the best choice of my career to date.

Jennifer Hight: So what is the basis of your job here at Western? I was wondering if you could also give us a couple of examples?

DM: My job is probably as broad of a job as there is on campus. The big focus of my job is to make sure students that come to Western graduate from Western. You know, sometimes that's called enrollment services, for me it's called student success. And so I work with faculty, I work with the programs such as the Writing Center or Math Center, or Advising, Financial Aid, to make sure all the things we're doing really are aimed at helping more students come to Western and graduate from Western. And it's a different job every day. There's a different issue, whether it's working directly with a student or working with an office or working with a faculty about a student so the job does change daily.

JH: You mention that you help students who are having issues with graduating. Is that making sure they're getting special attention in classes? Or making sure they're taking advantage of the tutoring center? How exactly does it work?

DM: You know, it varies Jen. The job itself can be about advising a student. Sometimes it's about helping them understand what services are on campus and how to use them, whether they be career services so they can see how the classes they're taking align to a career path they're interested in. Or maybe it's about using the Writing Center, or the Math Center, or connecting more with student organizations, whether they be student leadership or student clubs. It's finding ways for students to really create an experience that lets them grow and helps them stay more connected with the campus. And it changes daily.

JH: So is there . . . I know you mentioned that it changes daily, but we were wondering typically what is a work day like for you?

DM: [Exhales]. As typical as it gets, I'm usually here about seven in the morning and I start off by answering emails and planning my day. I typically have appointments that start about eight thirty, and on a normal day I have between five and seven meetings. Some of them are with students, often times others on committees or groups of folks who are talking about initiatives. Email in between the meetings and a few phone calls. And then a lot of research and data analysis because in this environment, we really want to understand what's happening so having good assessment data and actually understanding the numbers of what's happening. Looking nationally or regionally for good ideas. And that puts me through about six o'clock at night and I start to wrap up then and try to go home.

John Mozingo: So what's been your most interesting experience that you've had while working at Western?

DM: You know one of the many benefits of being on a college campus is that every day is different and this campus has a large number of activities. Whether they be awards dinners in the evenings (a lot of chicken), the dances, the concerts, the performances. Those are all wonderful, but I'd say the most interesting is where we are now as a university. A year ago we started on this new path, with a new board of trustees, going away from a shared board with the other public universities. Now we have a new board, and this board is focused just on Western, just on our students, our faculty, our staff and our future. And that's been amazing because the conversations really can be very directed and very engaging about what we, as a university, should be doing, what we shouldn't be doing, and how we're best serving our state and our students. And that's really interesting because from an organizational perspective that's a type of change that doesn't happen. This is very rare for an institution to have a wholesale change of its governing structure like we're going through now.

JM: So it's safe to say that you're pretty excited about the direction that Western is going in right now.

DM: You know, I really am. I think that as a university we are talking about all the right things and we are able to put energy and focus into doing those. So we've just started (like last week) a strategic planning process for the institution that will conclude in January. So it's a very fast process, but it's one that will allow us then to really know where we want to go and then the decisions that we make on a daily basis will really be driven by where it is we want to go, that's very exciting. And the new board is actively engaged, the new president, the staff and faculty, we're really going to roll up our sleeves on this and it will be our driving mantra of what decisions we make and what priorities we take, and directions we go. So it's very exciting.

JM: That's awesome. Is there any chance you might be able to reveal a little bit of the direction you guys feel like you'll be going?

DM: We've had one meeting and the first meeting has really been about, "Well what do we understand about ourselves today?" So as this process moves forward there will be opportunities not only for faculty and staff and students to hear what we're doing, but to give input. To really help us make informed decisions. So it'll be a very open process but a very fast process, but at this stage there's nothing to reveal because we're just getting started.

JM: Exciting.

Samantha Jones: So, the last question of this interview or rather two questions is that what are your plans and goals at Western now and for the future?

DM: Yeah, that's a great question. So our plan right now is really about preparing us to have a successful strategic planning process, supporting the transition of this new governance structure where we have thirteen board members who are phenomenal, but helping them become even more aware of what the university is, so they can make more informed policy decisions. It's about continuing to do the good things that we do, continuing to work with students. If I had to give up working with students, I would leave the institution because I really value that, and try to find a way to make more the Western experience more available to more students. So I want the institution to continue to grow, but not in the way that sacrifices the things that our students currently gain and benefit from but rather in order to make it more available to people.

SJ: That's fantastic. So last question, is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences working here [at Western]?

DM: You know, I think that working here for me has been an incredibly rewarding experience. I value the fact that every day that I will have a conversation (guaranteed multiple conversations) about what we can do better, about how we can help one student or a group of students. I also value the fact that on this campus, we're very open into trying different things. That we like being innovative as in around student success, whether it be with things like the Tuition Promise, or the Textbook Rental Program we have, or the new majors that we create. There's a continual interest in trying to do things a little bit better than we did yesterday, and a lot better than everybody else. That's exciting.

SJ: That's great. So I want to say one more thing. This is like in the way, way future when you say retire or go to a different institution. How would you put your legacy? How would you put your footprint on Western? How would describe that?

DM: You know, I think it's going to be a shared footprint. My hope is that when I do leave that there isn't a single thing that people say "Oh, that's just what Dave did." But rather something that I did with a bunch of people, that there was a collective effort to improve this or provide some new opportunity to students. So it would be a footprint of collaboration and cooperation with a bunch of people.

SJ: That's great.