

Interviewee: Dr. Debbie Williams, Director of Composition Dr. Debbie Williams

Gender dynamics and religious expectations as a student and then professor at Abilene Christian University between 1976 and 2021.

Key terms: dress code, curfews, pregnancy policy, marriage, “ring by spring,” conduct expectations, gender roles

Interview by: Claya Davis, September 14, 2021

Debbie Williams was a student at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas from 1976-1980. After receiving a B.A. in English from the institution, she pursued higher education at other universities. Years later, after receiving her doctorate, Williams returned to ACU as a professor in the English department. ACU is a private liberal arts university that is directly affiliated with the Church of Christ denomination. While the school has undergone policy changes and adapted more progressive views over time, its religious affiliation persists as a key part of its public identity. Dr. Williams reflects on the university’s policies regarding conduct expectations and dress code for female students as significantly stricter than those for their male counterparts during her time as a student at ACU. She discusses the role that religion played in the dating scene and the cultural pressure to find a spouse. Her current role as a professor at the same institution years later gives her the unique ability to compare her experience at the university as a student in the late 1970s to her current role as a professor. From this position, she discusses university pregnancy policies and the treatment of female professors.

This interview offers primary source information pertaining to the role of gender at a private, religiously affiliated institution, which is expressed through changing university policies, accepted school traditions, and conduct expectations in church and classroom settings. Dr. Williams’ ability to discuss issues from two positions, as student and professor, provides a well-rounded analysis of ACU’s shifting cultural practices and religious values.

Interviewer: Claya Davis

Date: Tuesday, September 14, 2021

Meeting Place: Brown Library, Media Room 3

Attendees: CD= Claya Davis (Interviewer), DW= Dr. Williams (Interviewee)

CD: This is an oral history interview conducted on September 14, 2021, in Abilene, Texas. The interviewee is Debbie Williams, who attended Abilene Christian College from 1976-1980. The interviewer is Claya Davis.

Um, so, growing up, did your family particularly prioritize education?

DW: Yes, actually. I am a fourth generation, uh, college student and there was just the expectation that, even though I was a girl, I would go.

CD: That seems like it would be pretty novel at the time for—because I know other professors who—their parents discouraged them from going to school because they were females.

DW: Right, right. Uhm, I think had my dad's mother not gone and then felt frustrated beca—she went—but she was frustrated with the fact that she couldn't continue to teach when she got married, uhm, that it was important for me to go in her eyes, uhm, and then my mother had to go back to school and finish her degree because I had siblings with cystic fibrosis and so our family need insurance, if they could have it.

So that grandmother helped my mother go, and I was twelve when that happened, uhm, and so both women just really had the strong sense—yes, I needed to go—and all the others who had gone previously, of course, were men.

CD: So, then, did you feel any particular pressure to choose ACU because of your family's experience with the university?

DW: Ohhh yes

(Both laugh)

CD: *Mhm.*

DW: Uhm, and my parents and grandparents worked together to tell me: “well, you know, if you will go to ACU, we will help you with payments on a little car.” Well, that was it; that iced the deal.

(Both laugh)

CD: Uhm, and then, coming here, what—do you remember, like, what dorm you were in or anything like that?

DW: Uhm, yes, actually my freshman year I was in Nelson.

CD: *Mhm.*

DW: And Nelson seemed old, even back in the day.

CD: *Aha!*

DW: But my roommate and I loved it. And the floors—as I imagine they still are--were wonderful to slip and slide on and, uh, it had this wonderful echo in the stairwell, and we would sing loudly and screech and it was just great fun. *Haha.*

CD: That's hila—I was actually in Nelson my freshman year too so, there's that, uhm. And as far as, like, behavior, what do you feel...was there, like, any expectation of what the ideal ACU woman or the ideal ACU man would look like?

DW: Uhm, yes, and I wasn't that, *haha.* I felt...like I needed to straighten my crazy curly hair, and uhm, I need to try to, uhm...not dress up, but to dress in certain clothes to fit. And that wasn't really anything that my family and I could afford.

My grandparents helped us financially with medical bills, and that was tough. And, uhm, so I didn't...you know I dated some, but I really didn't date or have any sense that I was going to marry or anything like that until I left ACU and went on to grad school.

CD: So, was there any kind of pressure to marry in the ACU environment, like, was that pushed?

DW: Oh yes, “ring by spring” was a thing back then.

CD: Wow, okay.

DW: So, uhh, yes, and I-I remember feeling angry as a professor the first time I saw that headline in *The Optimist*, uhm...I think it was spring of 2000, uhm, my family and I were the Oxford family and I thought, “we are still doing this, why are we still doing this to our students?” And, yeah, lots of pressure.

CD: Do you think that still plays out, like, today a little bit too, or not to the same extent?

DW: I'd like to think it's not to the same extent. Although, as I'm saying that, maybe it's because of COVID? But uhm, yes, I do think that students feel pressure to meet someone at ACU and get married.

CD: And I'm guessing that that mostly a religious thing, and if that's the case, do you...how do you think, like, religious culture affected even, like, gender roles at ACU? And like...within the classroom, in chapel, in church, relationships, or whatever.

DW: Oh, I-I think it has impacted it to a great deal. Uh, in some ways positive, in other ways...although, I think it was an intentional negative, uhm, I think, well...I have never worked at a university and been called “Miss” or “Mrs.” like I have at ACU. Uhm, I don't know, you know, so I could say, “well nobody could think of a middle-aged white woman as being capable of having a doctorate.”

But then, to back it up, when I was young, people assumed I didn't have a doctorate and, uhm, yeah, I don't know if that's because that's something women "shouldn't do" or the expectation was that they couldn't do that and have a family, or what.

And it has really bothered me in the past, and, finally, uh...it's just a battle I don't really care about anymore. I mean, ACU needs professors who have the terminal degree to be a quality school and have, uhm, quality education for students, uhm, many students don't really realize that, or they assume: "well, I've got enough because the men all have doctorates"—which is not true—uhm, and so there you go.

CD: Did you have any female professors when you went to school here?

DW: Uhm...some. And very few of them had doctorates. Uhm, several were not married, and so the spinster stereotype really played in. Uhm, I-I don't think that they commanded nearly the respect that their male counterparts did.

CD: *Mhm*. And something I'm specifically curious about is like, in my classroom settings, I have always felt, like, very encouraged to speak up, uhm, regardless of the fact that I'm a female. Like, I'm just curious how that played out in classroom settings when you were attending school. Were females encouraged to speak up in class?

DW: Well, as an English major, yes, I felt encouraged. Uhm, in other classes, uhm...not so much. And now that I'm giving that answer, perhaps that was because of size? Because ours was small and our professors really worked hard to get to know us. Uhm, I'm not sure...I'm not sure about that.

CD: Uhm, Yeah, I'm very curious... I-I would be curious to hear other people's opinions on that, I think. Uhm, and as far as majors are concerned, you said that you were an English major, uh, was that primarily a female field? Like, I know that a stereotype today is that a lot of females are in the English department, uhm, was that the same back then?

DW: No, and in fact, when I think about uhm, the English...the field of English, I-I think that is a male field, unless you're teaching in public school. Well, "public school"—universities can be public—uhm, if you're teaching in high school or junior high, uhm, certainly if you're teaching in lower grades, that's primarily female. But at the college level, I have the sense that it is still predominantly male.

CD: *Mm...mhm*. And, like, as far as other degrees, maybe, like nursing—I know that's another stereotypically female field—

DW: It is, it is, and I feel like it is, uh predominantly female. Uhm, in fact just, maybe 5 or six years ago, uhm—certainly not any further back than that—uhm, I had a student who was a male nursing major, and he talked about dealing with that stereotype.

CD: Kind of the other way, I'm assuming that a lot of females in, like, STEM get that.

DW: *Mhm!*

CD: Yeah, and then kind of, uh, shifting gears here, talking about conduct expectations—

DW: *Ahaha*—

CD: Uhm, were females expected to act a certain way? Did you notice that uhm, even like dress code or in the classroom, in chapel...?

DW: Uhm, yes. Back in the day, uhm, my mom, for example, she went a semester before she got married and then got pregnant and dropped out, and so girls weren't allowed to wear patent shoes in case they reflected their underwear and thus were too titillating for men to handle. Uh...we-I started at ACU the first year that women were allowed to wear pants, and, uhm, yeah, I was surprised by that. But I'd grown up wearing pants and I just...I didn't know how to appreciate it until years later.

The, uhm, expectation was that women needed to be cared for more and needed to be watched over more, lest we be lead astray. We had curfews, and even though I hear—we always heard that the boys did—they didn't seem to ever have to go home—or back to the dorm—at any certain time. Uhm, when we had to be in and we had to check in and got in trouble if we weren't in by a certain time.

CD: Huh. That's really fascinating I don't...like, cause curfews today are very, like, set in stone, you know, at 12 o'clock, so, just like the disparity, that-that makes me feel uncomfortable.

DW: Yeah!

CD: And then, as far as, like, sexuality is concerned, at ACU, do you remember any conversations about sexuality taking place in classrooms, in chapel...how did that look?

DW: Uhm, there was a class on—I don't think it was called marriage and family, it may have been but—Paul Faulkner and Carl Brecheen, before they really kind of kicked off a thing of marriage counseling, taught a class in which they addressed sexuality, and it was from the standpoint of, uhm, the male perspective—we didn't ever hear about anything from the female perspective—but at least they were talking about it.

CD: *Mhm*. And, like, among students? Did your peers talk about it? How were those conversations?

DW: Not really. It just wasn't...it wasn't the thing to talk about. And I remember feeling like, uhm, if you talked about certain things, or if you knew about certain things, then you were bad and, uhm, you did—you didn't need to let other people know that you were bad, so you needed to try not to talk about or, uhm...there were just a lot of things that were off limits, yeah.

CD: Yeah...uhm...*hmm*. That-that yeah, that feels...that's interesting. I think that that is still a little bit of the case, but we've gotten better about having those conversations. Uhm, were there any students that, on the other hand, that you noticed would purposefully rebel against those things and, if so, how were they treated?

DW: Oh yeah, I mean you always have your rebels. Uhm, and I-I obviously, men would get away with that more than women—

CD: *Mhm.*

DW: Uhm, it was one of those things where—as you would see in movies or imagine—uhm, some of them were kind of admired, uhm, and some of them, you know, were asked to leave campus. Uhm, I don't remember seeing a lot of people rebel though. I think most of us came, you know, to be educated and to get married and that was just that.

CD: And you said earlier that your fam—like, the pressure to excel academically and everything kind of kept dating and marriage out of your mind for a while. Uhm, do you think that those pressures and expectations did exist though?

DW: Yes, and actually that was why I ended up getting married, uhm, I was still single after a master's, and it was like, “what are you gonna do with your life?” I mean, you can go on with a master's, uhm, actually I had, uhm, received an appointment to be able to go and do technical writing for the Cancer Foundation in Washington D.C., uhm, or I could get married to, uh, a guy that I hadn't dated but a couple of months who was going to the school of preaching in Lubbock and I was working on my master's at Texas Tech and I felt heavy heavy pressure from family and a little bit from friends, uhm, you know... “this job will be over and what will you have then?”...Uh... “If you get married, you'll have a family and children and all these good things and you're gonna be so happy!”...and of course, life is complicated and, uhm, marriage is complicated and—

CD: At that point, were the majority of your other friends married?

DW: Yes, and, uh, I don't know what social clubs do, but the majority of them at the time had these ring ceremonies. So if a girl would get engaged, there would be a big, uhm, evening ceremony where you passed the ring around, or something like that, until you figured out, uhm, who was newly engaged, which, you know, pretty much everyone already knew anyway, but... so yes, uhm, when we left school, I was, uh...I was one of the few who wasn't. But most were planning weddings or had gotten married.

CD: Do you think that expectation is the same for men as it is for women?

DW: Uhm, actually, I feel like the men were pressured to get married. Not necessarily with the same timing that the women were, uhm, but it—at least from my perspective—it seemed like something that they were expected to do at some point, so—

CD: —And you mentioned earlier that your mom attended a semester and then ha...and then dropped out because she became pregnant. Uhm, I don't know how much you know about like, ACU's pregnancy polices now, uhm, but like do-do you know anything about the policies now?

DW: Well, yeah. My mom had gotten married after, uh, her freshman year. And so, when she started her sophomore year, she was pregnant and had terrible morning sickness. Uhm, then fast forward to today, yes, I remember, uhm, well when I was a student, uh, a friend who got pregnant without being married, and there was no choice except for her to leave. And I felt really...I felt really sad for her because it wasn't...there didn't seem to be any option or

any way to finish her education. And what I hope now is that the-the woman would be encouraged to do what she needed to do to have the baby and make the decision whether or not to keep the baby or put the baby up for adoption, and then be able to return and have support to be a mom and get a degree.

CD: *Mhm.*

DW: Uhm, we have—different women—combinations of female faculty on campus have asked the administration for, like, a daycare for sick children of faculty or for students who were non-traditional and had stud—I mean, had children—uhm, and I don't know if it's because Rainbow Bible School is so close or what—Rainbow's tough to get into, and it's expensive—I think faculty and students need an option that makes family feel more like a priority than a burden.

CD: *Hmm*, yeah. Like, you don't have to choose between education or teaching and having a family. Like, you can do both.

DW: Right. And still, when we have holidays that are not observed by ACU, I will have grandchildren with me—like I had my children—because schools are closed, and I have no place to send them.

CD: And, hypothetically, if your friend who became pregnant had stayed do you think she would have been treated well—

DW: No.

CD: — If she was permitted to stay?

DW: No, *Haha*.

CD: By students and staff?

DW: Yes, by students and staff. I think that there would have been some staff and some faculty that would have been very kind, uhm, but overall, it's uh... “you did this thing, and you knew not to, and we don't need to associate with people who could impact us negatively.”

CD: And I'm assuming that...did the...do you know if the person that got her pregnant was also a student at ACU?

DW: Uhm, I think so. This has been a long time, uhm...I don't remember clearly in that case. But I do know a young man who got a young woman pregnant, and I never did know if she was a student or not, but, of course, he did not have to leave.

CD: Yeah, that's what I was wondering.

DW: Yeah, *haha*.

CD: That's so...that's such a double standard. Uhm, thinking back to your experience and considering the mentors and role models that you had throughout your, uhm, educational experience at ACU, uhm, were they mostly female or were they male?

DW: Uhm, they were...they were mostly male, I guess. However, there was, uhm...Sally Reed in the music department who had a doctorate, and she was, uhm, gosh, she was so capable and so smart and kind of had a reputation for being overly tough. But I think that she had to be, and I remember thinking... “Yeah, a woman can be no-nonsense like that and can be department chair and can do these things.”

Uhm, and there was Jeannette Lipford, who was a voice teacher for many many years and, uhm, just pretty much right up to her death, students were benefiting from her knowledge. And even though she didn't have a doctorate, uhm, she was in one of those marriages where he respected her as a person and as a professional, and she commanded respect as a professional and just blessed a lot of people's lives and encouraged, uhm, but at the same time was no-nonsense. And I thought often about both women, uhm, in terms of life decisions and how I would craft a professional persona.

CD: Do you think that they had to be kind of more “no-nonsense” than some of their male colleagues in order to garner the same amount of respect in some ways?

DW: Well, I know Sally Reed did. Uhm, I don't know...Jannette was such a sparkling personality, uhm, I don't know...I think she could have pretty well—jolly well—done whatever she wanted, *Haha*.

CD: *Haha*. Did you ever notice, uhm, them being treated differently in the classroom because they were female professors?

DW: I never had a class with, uh, Dr. Reed—with Sally Reed—and the courses that I took with Janette were individual voice lessons. And so maybe I was the one that brought out her no-nonsense, uhm. She was much sought after, especially by those of us who were in theatre, uhm. I just remember seeing things about Sally and hearing things from my friends who were music majors. And then coming back to ACU years later to teach and knowing the behind the scenes of-of how she would have to work and things like this. So, I do think she had to be no-nonsense to be respected.

CD: Mhm. ACU—as you probably know—has prided itself on giving students a “Christian education.” Uhm, as you see it, how did the Christian aspect of your education interact with gender?

DW: You know, it didn't...it didn't occur to me to ask questions, to think about women's roles in the church, or uhm, how women were treated. I think mostly because, at home, rather than dealing with gender issues or having the emotional bandwidth to death with them, I was dealing with being the “well child” in a family where, uhm, two siblings had already died and the other two had cystic fibrosis. So, I had some of that undercurrent of... “oh well, you're just female and that's really too bad,” uhm, kind of a waste of gifts.

Uhm, so at ACU I didn't really think about it until I came back. And, when I was a young professor, as women began to pray and things like this, I didn't really know what I thought about that. And I...and my husband said, you know, at times he was okay with it and then he wasn't okay, and so, generally, it was less complicated to me just not to...not to think

about the gender issues and pursue other issues. Uhm, and now, I've been here long enough and seen enough life that I will pray in front of a class if it's spontaneous. I don't try to craft deliberate opportunities, but I don't shy away from it, if that seems the thing to do.

CD: Yeah, uhm, do you remember...you said that you were part of the first class who was allowed to wear pants, uhm, as females, uhm. Do you remember any other dress code, uhm, "suggestions" or qualifications that they put on you?

DW: Well, of course skirts had to be a certain length, and uhm, I-I don't remember if there was anything specific. But uhm, we would always give each other what we would called "skirt alerts," uhm, you know if it was windy, and you would even see that on the Texas ne—the local news— "'skirt alert' for you ladies! It's going to be very breezy today"—and tha-that kind of thing.

Uhm, I do remember that my roommate and I, we got in trouble, uhm, pledged a social club—which was not a very happy experience—but uhm, we got in trouble for something and so we were supposed to dress up and, uh, one of us dressed in a...like a dress you would wear to a banquet or something. And the other of us dressed, uhm, in a suit. *Haha*. And we didn't think anything about that. We thought we were being silly and funny...and we got in trouble for that. Of course, that raises other kinds of gender issues, uhm. I don't even know that we thought about why we got in trouble for that. It was just like...“oh well, maybe it's because they said 'both of you wear a dress' and one of us didn't” *ahaha*.

CD: That raises the question, like, people that maybe per-performed their genders differently outwardly, so maybe, like even questions about homosexuality. Uhm, was that a thing at ACU when you went to school here?

DW: Uhm, I learned that people could have that orientation when I was at ACU. And uhm, to be honest, the way that I learned was, uhm—I guess maybe it was the second semester, maybe the third semester in that social club—my roommate asked me if I would, uhm, become active again and direct Sing Song because the original directed had been dismissed for, uhm, for being a lesbian. And, at the time, I thought... “huh. Okay. I'm sorry that that happened. I don't really know what that means.” Uhm, and now, thinking about, uhm, the wonderful Sally Gary and her courage and the way she's handles things and all the...the different...the strides that we've made and the steps that we haven't taken...uhm, I look back now and think about the young woman who would have been such a marvelous Sing Song director and never had that chance.

CD: Yeah...So, do you think that that population of students was there? They just didn't feel like they had a place at the school, so they kept that part of themselves hidden.

DW: Yes.

CD: That's unfortunate.

DW: Well, and I...it was like...the people who didn't come back after the year was over, but who had hidden a pregnancy.

CD: Right. Do you think that was the same for men and women on both of the sides of that issue?

DW: Well, for homosexuality, yes. I think it had to have been. I didn't know any men specifically who, uh, were gay. But uhm, knowing the culture, it had to have been—

CD: Right—

DW: Something to keep hidden.

CD: Right...That's probably the reason we wouldn't know about it is because people would hide it probably.

DW: Right.

CD: And I'm assuming that it wasn't addressed in any sort of capacity publicly, like in classrooms or in chapel or anything like that?

DW: No. Uhm, I don't remember it being a part of the student handbook—I don't know that I ever read the student handbook—but I know now, as a faculty member there would've had to be something in the...in the handbook about "appropriate" sexual behavior.

CD: Right...How was the topic handled in, like, bible classes?

DW: I don't know that it ever was.

CD: Huh. One way or the other?

DW: No.

CD: Wow. Just like completely...that's interesting. Uhm, did you find, like...I often tell people today that some of my most liberal professors are in the bible department—

DW: *Ahaha*—

CD: — And the English department—

DW: Yes, I can see that.

CD: Was there, like, an understanding of that on campus when you were a student here too? Of certain professor believing differently.

DW: Uhm, I would say my most—and I didn't think of them as "liberal," I thought of them as "open"—uhm...music and theatre and, uhm...not English so much. And certainly not bible. There were a couple that, uh, I had that were very very kind. Psychology was a department where, at that time, I remember two professors who were very very open. And uhm...well Clyde Austin was one of them, and I feel like, to this day, he saved my family and me for...by, uhm, reaching back to my small attempt to reach to him and helping us in dealing with family issues.

CD: Wow. Do you think—you say the word open—would that have been, like a neg...a positive thing or a neg—

DW: Yes.

CD: That was a positive thing?

DW: Oh, not open?

CD: Yes.

DW: No, that-that was...well I...alright, that's a harsh thing to say that it's negative. Because maybe they would have been open to another kind of student—

CD: —Right—

DW: —But, to me, they were not approachable, uhm...for a problem, for a question, for a hypothetical, uh, to challenge things in the classroom. And I do think that was the case for several of us in my department who, uhm, had connections at ACU before we then came back as professors, uh, and so I suspect that's why...why we're known as more liberal, *ahaha*.

CD: And kind of, uh, wrapping this up. Is there anything that you'd like to say to current, uh, ACU students, uhm, just about anything we've talked about? Encouragement or anything.

DW: I think what I would say is, uh...you've chosen a good place to be. It's not a perfect place, uh, and so if you've come thinking that “this is a Christian place with Christian people,” well, uhm...it's a place to which people aspire to follow Jesus imperfectly. And whatever you look for, you'll find.

CD: How about specifically female students, maybe?

DW: Oh gosh, I would always say, uhm...have the courage of your convictions, try, and uhm...be confident that the Lord will meet you where you are. You don't have to go to sanctioned places to be met.

CD: I love that.

DW: *Haha*.

CD: Thank you so much for talking with me!

DW: Oh, thank you for asking!

CD. Yes.

ACC/ACU Gender and Sexuality Project
Oral History Release Form

Date/location of Interview: 09-14 , Brown Library , Media Room 3

Narrator/ Interviewee: Dr. Debbie Williams

Interviewee Address: 1342 Ruswood Dr. Abilene, TX 79601

Interviewee date of birth: 04-26-1958


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