

Summer 2009

Q & A with Dean Victoria McGillin

Linfield Magazine Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine

Recommended Citation

Linfield Magazine Staff (2009) "Q & A with Dean Victoria McGillin," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol6/iss1/11

This article is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@linfield.edu.

Q&A

with Dean Victoria McGillin



If you're not sure what an academic dean does, follow Victoria McGillin around for a day and you might get an idea.

On a typical day, she begins by chairing the Planning Council, the group charged with developing the college's strategic plan. Then it's an interview with a potential faculty member. An hour is free to work on reports for the college's Board of Trustees. Before lunch, it's an emergency planning meeting. After lunch, work on a task force report has to be completed. Since McGillin wants to remain involved with the challenges and rewards of the classroom, much of the remainder of the afternoon is devoted to prepping to teach her 7:30 a.m. psychology class, Introduction to Developmental Psychology, and meeting with students. In the evening, it's off to a Linfield theatre performance. She is always thinking, talking about and researching ways in which faculty and students are engaged in learning – whatever form it takes.

McGillin carved out some time to talk to *Linfield Magazine* about her first 11 months as Linfield's dean of faculty and vice president of academic affairs.

Linfield Magazine: What are some of the challenges facing Linfield?

Victoria McGillin: An institution must always be thinking forward about where it wants to be. I have had one-on-one meetings with nearly every faculty member

and I've asked them, 'What should that next step be?' For some it's been in the areas of scholarship. For some it is about getting the word out about what it is that we do well. For some it is about building a greater sense of intellectual culture and community on the campus. One of our challenges is defining what a Linfield-educated student should be capable of knowing and explaining those outcomes in a clear manner. I want to turn loose the incredible creativity of our faculty, who care deeply about the learning of their students, while helping us all do a better job of documenting how our students learn.

LM: How do we measure the success of a Linfield education?

VM: All of our faculty must think in a focused way about how each course and the overall program will define what our students should know, value and do differently by having had a Linfield education. We want to show that we are educating students who are looking at the world differently, who are engaged with the world and who will go forth as people who will constantly be asking questions and who will know how to find the answers.

LM: How do we maintain or build on an environment that really engages students and faculty?

VM: The best learning happens when students are

actively engaged in the learning process. For example, we have a trial classroom that is being used by larger classes such as the Principles of Biology. Students sit at circular tables instead of in a traditional lecture-style format. The circular tables provide a chance for the students to be more engaged in the learning process. Faculty rotate back and forth between shorter lectures and opportunities for students to work on common problems together. Students and faculty want the exact same thing. They want the opportunity to come together to learn, to challenge one another, and to produce meaningful work and meaningful outcomes. We have to create environments both in and out of the classroom to make that happen. We have faculty who are doing a marvelous job of integrating field work and active, experiential learning into their classes. An economics professor who taught a course on economic history, asked students to optimize donations to the local food bank under a variety of constraints including budget, nutrition, shelf-life and calories. Many students are working side-by-side with faculty on collaborative research that has the potential to generate solid data that will make it into publication.

LM: What are the most critical things that students need to learn today?

VM: Students have to think outside of the box and our faculty must take them outside of those boxes. We spend the 12 years before they enter college squeezing their education into separate boxes called chemistry, biology, English and history. They come to college and we tell them that they have to pick a major and they go into another box. Our disciplines are tremendously important foundations for study, but we need to do everything we can to show our students that those disciplinary “boxes” are not only porous, but that there are tunnels and channels connecting all the other boxes that are out there. Students have to be prepared to address and solve poorly articulated, ill-defined problems because the world is going to give them complex and ill-defined problems. Part of their job is to figure out how to clarify the questions and where to go for the answers. And none of the answers is going to live inside of any one box.

LM: How do we teach students to think outside the box?

VM: Some of the most exciting scholarly work for faculty is happening between the disciplines. We must focus on integrative learning that honors the disciplines, by opening the doors between them and showing students how to explore and understand that connection. They have to be able to apply hypothetical solutions to the real-world questions they are going to face for the rest of their lives. We have faculty who are doing a fabulous job embedding service or experiential learning into

their courses. Students are actually doing real work with the Grand Ronde tribe and with the homeless population in Yamhill County. Students aren't merely studying homelessness in a book, they are out on the street talking with and learning from homeless people. It is those kinds of experiences that will live with those students forever, long past the time that their book learning will have gone out of date.

LM: How is Linfield different from other institutions where you have worked?

VM: I've never been at an institution that has such an extraordinary town-gown relationship. The faculty is doing some tremendous professional work that engages them with the students and the local community. There is the sense of connectedness between the community and the institution that is reflected in the involvement of our staff and our faculty in every aspect of community life, as well as the interest of the local community in college activities. They come for football games, lectures, concerts and theatre.

LM: How have your first impressions of Linfield changed since you arrived?

VM: My first impressions of Linfield have only deepened. This is an exceptional institution with extraordinarily hard-working, talented and accomplished people. I tell incoming students that Linfield is a banquet and urge them not to starve. If students don't step up and get involved, they won't realize the extraordinary richness of opportunities that are available. The college's commitment to global and multi-cultural education and to integrative and experiential learning is what attracted me here because they are my own passions. But they are also incredibly important for a 21st century education.

The McGillin file:

B.S., psychology, The Pennsylvania State University

M.S., clinical psychology, The Pennsylvania State University

Ph.D., clinical psychology, Michigan State University

Associate Dean, Clark University

Dean of Studies, Assistant Provost, Wheaton College

Associate Provost, Texas Woman's University