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Q & A with Dean Victoria McGillin

Linfield Magazine Staff

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low 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 McGil-
lin 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 Psy-
chology, 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 might get an idea.

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 togeth-
er 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: 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 col-
lege 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 deep-
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ple. 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 extraordi-
nary 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 it aligns with 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

Q&A

with Dean Victoria McGillin

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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.

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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?’
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research that has the potential to generate solid data that
will make it into publication.

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

Victoria McGillin: 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 squeez-
ing their education into separate boxes called chemis-
try, biology, English and history. They come to college
and we tell them that they have to pack a major and
they go into another box. Our disciplines are tremen-
dously 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 box-
es 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.

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

Victoria McGillin: 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 stu-
dents 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 fabu-
ulous job embedding service or experiential learning into
their courses. Students are actually doing real work with
the Grand Ronde tribe and with the homeless popula-
tion in Yamhill County. Students aren’t merely studying
homelessness in a book, they are out on the street talk-
ing with and learning from homeless people. It is those
types of experiences that will live with those students
forever, long past the time that their book learning will
have gone out of date.

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