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Q & A: TWO DECADES

OF EXPERIENCE IN SECULAR AND CHRISTIAN
HIGHER EDUCATION:
AN INTERVIEW

Linda Gray, Oral Roberts University

Key Words *teach, higher education, colleges, universities, secular, Christian, public university, professor*

Introduction

The Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education (*The Journal*) seeks to support Christian educators by providing a forum for an exchange of research, educational resources, and ideas in order to encourage excellent teaching for the benefit of the students. *The Journal's* mission for Christian educators is—in part—the following statement:

Called by God, Christian educators allow their faith to influence (either directly or indirectly) all that they do in and out of the classroom. They transform their students by inspiring love for God and others and by stimulating intellectual curiosity and creativity. The ability to teach is a gift from God, and those who are truly called to teach have a desire to see learning take place. (https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched/aimsandscope.html)

It is with this in mind that we seek to share the thoughts and insights of two Christian professors in higher education. Both of these women have taught in higher education for over two decades each, and both have taught in Christian institutions as well as in secular institutions. They both bring a Christian worldview, dedication to teaching, and a focus on student learning to their classrooms.

Dr. Mary Alice Trent has worked 21 years in Christian higher education, serving as tenured Professor of English at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, OK, where she worked for nearly 13 years, and Professor of English for eight years—seven of those years as Division Chair—at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion. She also taught three years in public education at Louisiana State University-Eunice as Assistant Professor of English and served as Director of the Humanities Computer Lab. In addition, she has been a visiting teacher/scholar at Christian and secular universities abroad: LCC International University in Klaipeda, Lithuania; Beijing University in China; and Excelsia College in Sydney, Australia. Along with journal articles, poetry, and stories, Dr. Trent has had four books published.

Dr. Laura Sherwood, whose specialty is media and communication, has worked more than 20 years in higher education, currently as an associate professor serving as Director of Leadership at John Witherspoon College in Rapid City, SD. She also teaches online courses at CSU-Global (Colorado State University) and at Oral Roberts University. In addition, she has taught at the University of Nebraska at Kearney and as an Assistant Professor of Media at Oral Roberts University for several years. She earned a bachelor of science degree from Oral Roberts University, a master's of education degree from the University of Nebraska, and a Ph.D. from Regent University in Virginia.

Question: What are some experiences you've had or people you've met that inspired or led you to a career in higher education

Dr. Trent: When I was only four and five years old, I would occasionally accompany my mother, an English and math teacher, to Bethune High School where she taught. She was the earliest influence on my life. I grew up in a household where my mother and father stressed the value of an education; in fact, they started personal college savings accounts for my brother and me while we were infants. I can recall my father taking our family on a summer vacation to College Station, Texas, to visit Texas A & M University, where his company had sent him for educational training. Along with these early childhood memories, I was later inspired by black female pioneers such as

Ms. Mary McLeod Bethune and Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, who were both college professors and university presidents. All of these people, among others in my family, were an inspiration for me. Once I started college, I fell in love with the atmosphere of higher education, and I was inspired to teach, mentor, and motivate students to achieve their greatest potential.

Question: How have your own professors affected your career in academia?

Dr. Sherwood: I've been blessed to have had amazing professors throughout my time beginning with my undergraduate degree from Oral Roberts University. I went on to earn my Master's in Education from the University of Nebraska at Kearney, where I again had so much respect for my professors. I never dreamed I could myself become a professor, but when the department chair approached me to apply for a teaching assistant position, I did, which eventually led to a full-time position as an assistant professor. I found I had a passion for teaching and went on to earn a doctorate. I had the privilege of earning my Ph.D. from Regent University, where my advisor, Dr. Keeler, encouraged me and helped me complete my dissertation.

Question: What factors have kept you in this career?

Dr. Trent: I have stayed in the profession of higher education because I truly believe that I am called to make a difference in the lives of college students through my teaching, leadership, scholarship, and service. I also believe that education can positively influence the projection of a family and a community, so I am determined to use my privilege to help others reach their potential and leave a legacy.

Question: Do you still enjoy teaching even after more than two decades in higher education?

Dr. Sherwood: I was offered a position at Oral Roberts University as an assistant professor, which was a dream come true. It was the

experience of a lifetime and culminated in being offered a position as Chair of the Media Department. Right at the same time, however, my husband informed me that we were moving out of state. Not wanting to give up teaching, I applied to teach online courses for CSU-Global (Colorado State University). I had a dear colleague, Dr. James Brown, who taught for them and encouraged me to apply. After a couple years teaching for them, I was offered the position of Lead Faculty.

Although teaching online allowed me to continue teaching in higher education, I missed being in the classroom. This last summer I applied to teach for John Witherspoon College. They offered me the position of Director of Leadership and Communication and the rank of associate professor. I am back in the classroom and couldn't be more thrilled.

Question: How have students and educational trends changed over the years you've been teaching in higher education?

Dr. Trent: In terms of educational trends, how we do global education appears to be changing; more recently there has been a decrease in the number of international students coming to study in American colleges and universities whereas 15 years ago this was not the case. On the other hand, more colleges and universities are partnering with educational centers around the world to create more American onsite educational programs in other countries.

Another trend I see is with delivery of education: more universities and colleges are exploring online education than ever before because more students work while they attend college.

Another major trend is the changing racial demographics across the United States. Colleges and universities will have opportunities to establish learning environments that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom and in the curriculum and co-curriculum, thereby creating a healthy cultural climate for all students and employees to thrive in.

Question: For the last 20 years or so, the role of media has expanded exponentially. How has that changed how your students learn?

Dr. Sherwood: Students are battling with being distracted with so much social media. At the same time, the volume of information available to them is astounding. The challenge continues to be sifting through it all and finding credible and trustworthy research.

Question: What similarities and differences in teacher expectations (e.g., “publish or perish”) have you encountered at the various places of higher learning (both secular and Christian) where you’ve taught?

Dr. Trent: At the small private liberal arts universities where I have worked, the primary focus has been teaching, mentoring, and advising students; but research was also valued, especially teaching and scholarship or faculty-student collaborations. At the public university where I have worked, teaching was important, but so was research, and faculty felt more pressure to publish in order to pursue rank promotion and tenure.

Question: What are some similarities and differences in terms of institutional goals and outcomes you have encountered at the institutions where you’ve taught?

Dr. Sherwood: The public institutions and private Christian schools’ goals where I’ve worked are the same—to provide the highest quality of academic excellence. But, in all honesty, I have found the Christian-based schools to be superior in the quality of education, student attitudes, and expectations. If asked to choose, I would recommend Christian education over public universities for a better overall quality of educational experience.

Question: What are some curriculum adjustments you, as an English professor, have made as a way to adapt to both secular and Christian environments?

Dr. Trent: One of the greatest adjustment for me was managing the curriculum expectations of a private, Christian versus a public, secular university. In comparison, I think both institutions seek to educate students who will become highly competent, ethical professionals. However, the curriculum for achieving such end varies. In a Christian university, I teach from a Christian worldview and integrate this worldview into my curriculum, so, for example, I might use works by C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers or Gilbert Chesterton to discuss Sacred themes; I might employ works by Sojourner Truth, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jonathan Swift to teach social justice themes. In a public university, I taught works by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Frederick Douglas, and Emily Dickenson, for example, but I also incorporated the same works, among many other works like these, at the Christian college. After all, classic works of literature are valued at both kinds of institutions. Though the overall philosophical framework may be different for these two types of institutions, I still expose my students to various schools of literary thought in my literature classes. In a similar way, in a creative writing or advanced writing course, I still teach many of the same techniques that will benefit both Christian writers and secular writers.

Question: What are some adjustments you've made to your teaching methods to fit the secular or Christian educational situations you've encountered?

Dr. Sherwood: The largest classes I've had the opportunity to each are 25-30 students. In all classes, student engagement is key, and I work to make each and every student feel valued and engaged. I work on being student-centered, whether in a Christian or secular setting. I do appreciate being able to freely share my faith, pray in class, and incorporate Biblical principles at the Christian intuitions where I've had the opportunity to teach.

Question: What are some of the most important life lessons you try to impart to your students?

Dr. Trent: A few of the life lessons that I try to impart to my students are (1) that they should use their knowledge, skills, college degree(s), and talents to make a difference in the lives of other people in communities near and far; (2) that they should strive to be responsible and ethical in the workplace; and (3) that all things in life will work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

Dr. Sherwood: I work diligently to make classes interactive and practical. The classes are geared toward application exercises that they will be able to use in their careers and in life in general. Since I am older and worked in the industry for a while before teaching, I have many stories and experiences to share.

Dr. Linda Gray is Professor Emerita of English at Oral Roberts University where she has taught composition, linguistics, technical writing, and education courses for more than 30 years. She has served a president of the College of Education Faculty Senate and president of the Arts and Sciences Faculty Senate as well as the chair of the English and Modern Languages Department. She has a B.A. in Linguistics from California State University-Fullerton; an M.A. in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California; and an Ed.D. in English Education from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee; and she has lived and studied in Edinburgh, Scotland. Dr. Gray has presented papers at numerous English conferences and contributed to several publications, and she has also been awarded tenure and several teaching awards. Dr. Gray can be reached at lgray@oru.edu.

