

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 5

2020

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Recommended Citation

Gray, L. (2020). Q&A: A career in Christian higher education: An interview. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education*, 10(1), 25-33. <https://doi.org/10.31380/sotlched.10.1.25>

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Q&A:

A CAREER IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INTERVIEW

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*Journal of the Scholarship
of Teaching and Learning for Christians in
Higher Education* 10.1 (2020) 25-33
http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched/

Key Words *teach, Christian higher education, education, university, college, undergraduate, graduate, students*

Abstract

Much has changed in U.S. culture since the 1970s, requiring teachers to adjust their methods of reaching students who are markedly different from their parents' generation. But through the decades, Christian educators have tried to demonstrate God's love through caring, patience, knowledge, and commitment, and in a Christian institution, they also seek to bring a Christian worldview to their students. But if some students at Christian universities are not believers nor seekers and when students lack basic biblical knowledge, teachers in Christian institutions must adjust their teaching methods. Online teaching creates even more challenges as students and teachers can see each other and communicate only through electronic equipment, which can enable students to "hide" behind a computer screen or,

conversely, provide a safety net so students can speak more openly. To meet the changing belief systems of students over the decades and changing technology, Christian higher education should be innovative to meet ever-changing student needs and higher education's goals.

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)

One such teacher answered the call and dedicated herself to a career in educating and connecting with students. Much has changed in U.S. culture since the 1970s, requiring teachers to adjust their methods of reaching students who are markedly different from their parents' generation. But through the decades, Christian educators still strive to demonstrate God's love through caring, patience, knowledge, and commitment, and in a Christian institution, they also seek to bring a Christian worldview to their students.

The Interview

Dr. Ruth Givens' experience in Christian higher education spanned over 40 years, beginning with Oral Roberts University, where she taught English for 19 years and was the founding editor of the freshman composition textbook. Dr. Givens then began teaching at Wheaton College, chairing the Master of Arts in Teaching program and teaching the capstone course in philosophy of education. Following her seven years at Wheaton College, she became a professor of graduate programs at Seattle Pacific University followed by Azusa Pacific University until 2019. She has published in *Christian Scholar's Review*, *Issues in Teacher Education*, *Journal of Curriculum Discourse and Dialogue*, *Action and Teacher Education*, and has written three book chapters.

Question: Dr. Givens, you've recently retired after 44 years teaching in Christian higher education. Did you grow up attending Christian schools too?

Dr. Givens: No, I didn't. My teaching career in Christian higher education began when I was 26 and ended just after I turned 70. I began teaching English at Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, after four years of teaching in the public high schools. As an undergraduate instructor, I taught the required freshman composition courses and ended up editing the textbook that ORU used for the next 30 years. Because my public-school training didn't acquaint me with Christian education, however, I was unfamiliar with religious schooling, so beginning classes with prayer or preparing devotions didn't occur to me. My faith qualified me to teach at an evangelical university, but my understanding of what that entailed came later through personal experience.

Question: Since you didn't attend Christian schools yourself and had only public school training, how did you adapt to teaching in a Christian university?

Dr. Givens: I spent the first 19 years of my teaching career at Oral Roberts University, where the Christian ethos was clearly communicated through its mission to teach the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. The emphasis on integrating faith into the curriculum characterized the school's focus on faith and experience. As a charismatic university, ORU held a unique position among other colleges in the Christian College Coalition, and with Oral Roberts having had an extensive tent ministry, world-wide crusades, and radio and television evangelistic programs for decades, its uniqueness gave the school an identity that drew students from all over the globe. As a prominent American Choctaw evangelist, Oral Roberts influenced mainstream Christianity with charismatic/Pentecostal beliefs in healing and worship practices that included gifts of the Holy Spirit, like speaking in tongues. Even in the early decades of the university, which opened its doors in the 1960s, students came from many families and communities shaped by Roberts' dynamic preaching and from dozens of countries on nearly every continent. These students' active engagement in the world embodied the ORU students' collective consciousness and created a diverse school before diversity became part of the educational conversation.

Question: With Oral Roberts University being not only Christian but also Pentecostal/charismatic, did you have to adjust to fit into the ethos of ORU?

Dr. Givens: Although I enjoyed the synergy that pervaded ORU's campus, the whole charismatic movement was foreign to me. Because I was raised a Southern Baptist, my faith was rationally and cognitively based, so behavior beyond my ability to comprehend threatened my personal experience as a Christian. In other words, my perspective was constructed by my own history, and my experience at ORU challenged my interpretations of what it meant to be a Christian. Despite my unfamiliarity with the charismatic movement, I learned what it meant to integrate faith and learning there, and that way of teaching became natural for me.

Question: After almost two decades of teaching undergraduates at a charismatic/Pentecostal university, you moved on. Where did you go next and why?

Dr. Givens: I left ORU to teach at Wheaton College in Illinois, and it was a completely different faith environment. I had dreamed of teaching there because Wheaton is known for its exemplary academics, and for me, its connection to C.S. Lewis made teaching there my ultimate goal. So, it was with heightened expectations that I arrived on that campus; however, such elevated expectations can only result in diminished returns when they are extraordinarily high. The inclusive community I experienced at ORU became an exclusive community at Wheaton, where all expectations were reversed. Regarding the shift in each school's ethos, I made a comment once and found myself later quoted by another Wheaton professor. I claimed, "At ORU, it's all grace and no accountability, and at Wheaton it's all accountability and no grace." My point was that the stakes had changed because the schools operated with such different expectations. ORU's emphasis on experience and faith didn't fit the Wheaton model, where "sola scriptura" hung on the library wall.

Theologically, Wheaton identified itself as more Calvinist, although its roots were Wesleyan. A Wheaton professor, Mark Noll, had written *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, which basically articulated Wheaton's paradigm: Reformed Christianity trumped pietistic practices characterized by many evangelical churches. In an environment where students sign a pledge endorsing their faith in Christ, belief is assumed. The calendar included chapel and activities centering on discipleship and evangelism, so the curriculum followed in kind. Some classes began with prayer, some did not, but a discussion always included a biblical perspective in various ways. Similar to ORU, faith integration emerged naturally, where students and faculty connected their faith perspective to academics.

Question: Did you find the students at these two schools similar, or were they different because the ethos of each school was different?

Dr. Givens: Reflecting over my experiences teaching undergraduates in Christian higher education from 1975 to 2002, I realize that the similarities far outweigh the differences. Perhaps because both are situated in the Midwest, my theology didn't change significantly; I considered myself an evangelical who leaned toward liturgical worship, but the sense that I was serving Christians remained the same. In fact, I considered myself a kind of gadfly who provoked complacent students to think beyond their comfortable assumptions. I knew my audience because I had been one them myself, cradled in Christian belief throughout my life. I wanted my students to grapple with unfamiliar ideas and emerge stronger in their faith rather than simply endorsing practices handed down by their parents.

Question: So Oral Roberts University and Wheaton College are both Christian institutions in the Midwest, and you taught undergraduates at both. However, one was charismatic and the other Calvinist, and you taught English in one and education in the other. You stated that the students were largely similar; was that true with the faculty and administration at these two schools?

Dr. Givens: Teaching English at ORU and education at Wheaton, I discovered that each field's trajectory presented enormous challenges that I hadn't anticipated. My own doctoral program in education had been immersed in theoretically based curriculum, which inadequately prepared me for the practical ends required for teacher education, such as lesson planning, classroom management, and standardization requirements from state and federal levels. Furthermore, research dominating the social sciences differed significantly from the theoretical scholarship germane to the humanities, which was more familiar to me. However, emphasizing testing procedures, control groups, and statistical interpretations, and quantitative research dominated the field of education.

I also recognized the disturbing dismissal toward education faculty among other departments and schools, primarily because, as a general rule, educational faculty published less prolifically than some of

their colleagues in other fields. However, I learned from experience that heavy workloads, extensive fieldwork, and standards-driven paperwork based on credential requirements accounted for the paucity of publications rather than inferior academic skills of education faculty. Education professors have been the workhorses of higher education and deserve the same esteem as professors from other disciplines.

Question: After approximately seven years at Wheaton, you moved to Washington to teach education courses to graduates at Seattle Pacific University. Was that an easy transition, or did the move to the West Coast or the change to teaching graduate students create unexpected challenges?

Dr. Givens: Christian higher education shares a similar, and in part, unified ethos. Whether it's Wheaton's "For Christ and His Kingdom" or Azusa Pacific's "God First," the purposes and goals of these schools are biblically based on the message of and salvation through Christ. Each institution's mission statement delineates the school's character. However, because the graduate students at Seattle Pacific University and Azusa Pacific University are not required to sign a faith statement, a unified Christian identity is impossible to maintain at these graduate schools. Many graduate students, and I can only speak for education, choose a professional program like teaching for reasons that may not be related to their faith position. The timing, convenience, and the courses offered are among some of the reasons graduate students choose to attend these Christian graduate schools, regardless of any religious affiliations of the students and universities.

I discovered that I was not prepared for this shift in the students' faith perspective, so during my first few semesters teaching graduate school, I held onto some misguided assumptions about my students' belief systems. Challenging my curriculum choices happened occasionally. For example, the Christian bastion of sound theology, C.S. Lewis, didn't always fly with my graduate students at Seattle Pacific University or Azusa Pacific University. While some

rejected Lewis' views on marriage, others didn't share his biblical beliefs. These challenges, among other oppositional views about Christianity, were sometimes spoken but more often confessed to me confidentially.

Question: Eventually you moved to Southern California to teach graduate education at Azusa Pacific University. Were the spiritual beliefs of the education students at Azusa Pacific similar to those you had taught at Seattle Pacific?

Dr. Givens: After four years at Seattle, I began teaching at Azusa Pacific, and largely because both universities are on the West Coast, and both universities didn't require faith statements of their graduate students, the students at both schools were similar. A major difference between teaching undergraduate students and graduate students was their degree of Biblical knowledge and their experience with any religious faith; graduate students were more theologically skeptical and less likely to know even common Bible stories. At Azusa, all students were required to participate in faith integration activities, through writing papers, making presentations, or engaging in faith integration class discussions to varied degrees of success. However, some students admitted to me that they falsified their answers to avoid being isolated or singled out.

After teaching graduate school for 17 years, my whole teaching philosophy changed. I no longer assumed that all of my students shared the same faith—or any faith, for that matter—so I envisioned teaching to a different audience where the students could share their faith journey in the context of their own experiences. Although I was open and honest about my own Christian faith, I tried to make it clear that all faiths were welcome. Some students let me know how much they appreciated the honesty they felt in my class when they didn't have to hide who they were.

Question: By this time in your teaching career, online education was becoming widespread. Have you taught any online courses, and if so, what adjustments did you have to make?

Dr. Givens: The last five years of my teaching career, Azusa Pacific’s master’s program went completely online, which posed even more substantive challenges for faith-based institutions where both believing and non-believing students have become invisible participants in the program.

Educators from my generation didn’t sign up for this radical shift in pedagogy. Forming relationships, which drew many of us into Christian higher education, has created a multi-dimensional challenge—that of reaching students we can’t see or touch and caring about students who are able to hide behind a computer screen. In some cases, online learning provides a safety net for students who can more boldly state their philosophical reasons for ethical choices. The temptation for “God-talk” is actually less frequent online because I introduced the classes as a safe zone for open discussions and varied opinions.

Still, the relational aspect of learning—particularly for Christian schools whose students may not share the same beliefs—requires even greater efforts to reach them in ways that may be less conventional. With each dimensional distance, the faith challenges and the virtual distance, Christian higher education needs to reinvent itself in ways never imagined when I began teaching over four decades ago.

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 35 years. She has served as president of the Arts and Sciences Faculty Senate and of the Education 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, and an Ed.D. in English Education from Vanderbilt University. Dr. Gray can be reached at lgray@oru.edu.