

Interviewee: Margot Iris Soven, PhD

Interviewer/Abstractor: Rebecca Goldman

Date: March 18, 2015 (Session 2 of 3)

Location: Margot's office, Olney Hall, La Salle University

Running Time: 50:13

- 00:00 Introductions of interviewer and interviewee, including permission to record.
- 00:15 Margot shares her first impressions of La Salle and its students. When she first arrived in 1980, she found that people were friendly. She still remembers Marjie Allen¹ walking up to her and welcoming her during Faculty Orientation. "My impression was that this is a welcoming campus." She compares La Salle students to students at Drexel, where she had previously taught, describing them as hard-working and courteous. Many were first-generation college students and motivated to succeed.
- 02:58 Margot describes the English Department in 1980, which was larger than it is today, and able to offer more advanced courses. She found the faculty to be experienced, diverse, and accomplished. She remembers Jim Foote, whose specialty was drama, and Bob Fallon, a Shakespeare scholar. Brother Patrick Ellis, who was then the President, taught a course in 18th-century sarcasm. "People were well-known by their specialty." Margot was the specialist in the teaching of writing. She was the only one who had studied it on the graduate level, but others, like Marjorie Allen, who had a linguistics background, brought knowledge from other disciplines and from their own teaching experience. Claude Koch was well-known as a composition instructor and a teacher of poetry; Margot observed his class to learn from him.
- 07:14 Margot is asked about writing support available to students. In the 1980s, there was a writing center, staffed by a director, an adjunct or two, and students. Margot thinks that it served fewer students than it does now. She worked in tandem with the director and formed a Writing Committee that brought together faculty interested in the teaching of writing.
- 09:08 Margot describes her committee service at La Salle, including the Funding Board, which funded student organizations, and the Academic Discovery Program² selection committee. She also served on the [Faculty] Senate for a couple of years. "We didn't seem to have as many committees as we have today."

¹ Dr. Marjorie Allen, a professor in La Salle's English Department.

² "The Academic Discovery Program (ADP), a special admissions program at La Salle University, provides free support services for students whose records indicate that they could benefit from extra academic assistance and who also meet certain criteria of financial need."

http://www.lasalle.edu/provost/academiclearningsupport/index.php?section=adp&page=about_adp

- 10:27 Margot describes the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program she developed at La Salle, which started a couple of years after she arrived. Her work with this program strengthened her connections with other departments. People across campus were interested in learning how to use writing more effectively in their classrooms. The program started with week-long summer workshops, from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. “Something like two-thirds of the faculty had participated in a Writing Across the Curriculum workshop.” It expanded to include a beginners workshop and advanced workshop. Margot started by teaching the workshops alone, but she was soon joined by Dr. [William] Sullivan in the Philosophy Department. Faculty from Biology, Social Work, and Foreign Languages all published papers on incorporating Writing Across the Curriculum in their courses. The program also led to curricular changes, where certain courses were designated as writing-intensive. There were department-level and school-level workshops, and people from those areas collaborated with Margot to develop workshops. WAC faculty even gave workshops at other schools. Margot presented with Glenn Morocco [of the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department] at a school in New Jersey. She presented with Dr. Sullivan at a variety of national conferences. “This was a period when writing across the curriculum, in general, was very hot nationally.” She helped run workshops that attracted hundreds of educators to La Salle. Margot explains that there was no competition with technology workshops like there is today. “We were the only game in town, the main game in town, when it came to faculty development.”
- 18:37 Margot compares past interest in Writing Across the Curriculum to current interest. Faculty are still concerned about Writing Across the Curriculum today, but by necessity, they are interested in many other things, especially technology. Margot cites the Explorer Café³ series as representative of faculty interests.
- 20:44 Margot describes her current involvement in faculty development. From the early 1990s until this year, she ran a yearly series of eight workshops, and also ran a faculty workshop day every May on different topics related to teaching. This May workshop brought in outside presenters and focused on a variety of topics, not just writing. “We brought some of the most well-known people in higher education here to La Salle over the last ten years.” Margot also runs the First Year Odyssey⁴ program. She describes plans for upcoming workshops to be led by [Professor] Megan Schoen, who is taking over the composition program.
- 22:14 A highlight of Margot’s professional development work is the major National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant she helped bring to La Salle. In the

³ “An Explorer Café is an informal, interdisciplinary forum that brings the La Salle community together for engaging, interactive discussions on thought-provoking topics.” <http://wp.lasalle.edu/cel/the-explorer-connection/explorer-cafes>

⁴ “‘The First Year Odyssey’ refers to the one credit program which introduces students to La Salle University and the city of Philadelphia through activities such as field trips and campus wide programs. Students participate in the First Year Odyssey as part of designated courses or in special First Year Odyssey sections.” <http://www.lasalle.edu/academ/core/programs.htm>

early 1990s, she worked with Dr. Sullivan on a project, funded for three million dollars by the NEH and the Pew Foundation, called “Finding a Common Language: Integrating the Humanities Across the Curriculum.” The project included four years of faculty seminars. “It was kind of the pinnacle of heaven of faculty development.” When the grants ended, La Salle funded the program for its final year. “It’s hard to imagine that happening today” because the NEH no longer funds that type of project.

26:03 Margot describes her research as a tenure-track faculty member in the early 1980s. Much of her research, and related publications and presentations, was about Writing Across the Curriculum and the teaching of writing. Her teaching and administrative work at La Salle influenced her publications. She proposed La Salle’s first business writing and science and technology writing courses, taught a course on teaching writing in secondary schools, and started the Writing Fellows program—and wrote publications about her experiences. Her most recent book is *Linked Courses for General Education and Integrative Learning*. Margot also collaborated on a book about technical writing with Carolyn Boiarsky.

30:28 Margot explains La Salle’s Writing Fellows program, where students tutors were assigned to specific classes. Margot taught English 360, the course that the writing tutors took. The course was cross-listed as an Honors course, and she cooperated with Jack Grady, then the director of the Honors Program. “We got many of the best students.” The program ran for at least ten years before Margot turned it over to Jaime Longo, who runs a version of the program and was a Writing Fellow as a student at La Salle. “It seems to be a very effective model...[but] it’s an expensive model.” Writing Fellows worked with several departments, including La Salle’s BUSCA⁵ program.

34:54 Margot describes her work with the Core Curriculum. When Barbara Millard was the Dean [of the School of Arts and Sciences], she put out a call for volunteers, didn’t get any responses, and asked Margot to direct it. “I liked Barbara very much, and it sounded like an interesting challenge.” Her first major task was to develop the doubles program, which required every student to take two linked courses⁶. La Salle hired six full-time non-tenure track faculty to teach most of the doubles courses. Although the doubles were successful, and faculty and students liked them, the program was eliminated a few years ago due to cost. Margot also took over the First Year Odyssey as part of her directorship. The “understanding at home and abroad” component of the core was never satisfactorily implemented. “It was just too diffuse.” The Core that Margot worked on went into effect into 1990, and except for the end of the doubles program, it didn’t change much after that. Dr. [Kevin] Harty is chair of the committee which is currently working on implementing the new Core. Margot’s

⁵ BUSCA is a program where Spanish-speaking students can complete college-level courses while learning English.

⁶ In a follow-up email, Margot clarified that the requirement applied to freshmen, not all students.

formal title has been changed to First Year Odyssey Director.

- 41:24 Margot discussed changes in students' writing skills over the course of her career at La Salle. SAT scores of incoming students have dropped, and she has noticed a tendency to give less-challenging assignments. "You accommodate where the students are." Students in freshman composition courses don't write as well as students in the past, but student skills also vary from year to year.
- 45:07 Margot has tried to incorporate technology in her classroom, "but it's not my strong suit." Students rely more on PowerPoints and other files posted to Canvas [course management system] rather than taking notes. "I think students are nervous if you don't give them things in writing." She compares La Salle to Penn [University of Pennsylvania], where she is currently sitting in on a course, and notes that while laptops are almost universal in the classroom at Penn, they aren't at La Salle. Margot hasn't taught any online classes yet, but from her experience with Coursera⁷ courses, she thinks it would be challenging to develop courses for the kinds of students she teaches.
- 49:58 Rebecca thanks Margot for participating in the interview. The recording ends at 50:13.

⁷ Coursera is a platform for free, open online courses.