

Reminiscences of Laurie Quinn

March 11, 2021

Narrator: Laurie Quinn, former Interim President, Champlain College

Interviewer: Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director

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Transcriptionist: Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director

Introduction

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Laurie Quinn, former Interim President at Champlain College, conducted by Erica Donnis, Champlain College Special Collections Director, on March 11, 2021. This interview is part of the Champlain College Archives COVID-19 Oral History Project. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. This interview is transcribed in full in this document; an ellipsis [...] indicates a pause in the conversation rather than content that has been removed. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Interview Transcription

[Start of recording]

Donnis: Hi, my name is Erica Donnis, and I am the Special Collections Director at Champlain College. Today is March 11th, 2021. And we are conducting an oral history interview. Laurie, would you mind introducing yourself?

Quinn: Sure, Erica. Hi, I'm Laurie Quinn. I am Champlain College's Interim President in the 2019-2020 academic year. And prior to that, for five years, Champlain's Provost and Senior VP for Academics.

Donnis: Thanks for joining us today, Laurie. Could you walk us through, kind of ... give us the lay of the land before COVID-19 arrived in our community. What were your regular job responsibilities?

Quinn: So I was about, oh, gosh. I was at an interesting point in my work with the College because we were ... we were working hard to make the interim year as productive as possible. Really positioning the College in its search for a new permanent president, and wanting to articulate some of the goals of the College's 2025 strategy. And so, work on that had really begun with the summer, with my acceptance of the interim presidency, and had been happening in earnest all the way through the end of the calendar year [2019]. After the holiday break, there was more of an emphasis in my work on donor relations. Beginning to go ... kind of go forth and tell the good story about where Champlain was headed, and how we were going to begin working on implementing our strategy as soon as possible.

So then [laughs], one of the visits I made was actually to a couple of families in California, and that happened in the middle to the end of February of 2021. And ... Sorry, of 2020. And I returned from the trip to California. Had been rather anxiously watching the emerging news about the pandemic, which of course was having more of an impact at that time on the West Coast. The trip did not seem in any way particularly high risk, although I do remember bringing a surgical mask with me, tucking it into my luggage just in case. And when I arrived at the airport in California and in going around the city -- I was primarily in the San Francisco area -- I found that the population wasn't particularly ... it didn't seem particularly changed -- the circumstances of life in California.

I did also visit, had an opportunity to do a professional development program for college presidents at LinkedIn. So traveled to LinkedIn headquarters, a trip that ... and you know, had some dinners with families in restaurants. A trip that, thinking back on it, just a little over a year later, feels extraordinarily strange to imagine.

But when I returned from California, the small team that had been tracking the virus, and the progression of things, we really ramped up, to being a full-on response, and then crisis management group for the College. And so that group consisted ... I know that our Risk Manager [Ted Winokur] was a key voice. Our Dean of Students was heavily involved. Our study abroad teams were important voices in the conversations as they ramped up. And then I began to connect those conversations very directly, right around the end of February [2020], very beginning of March, with College leadership through the President's Cabinet.

It was March 11th of 2020 that we implemented the decision I had made about closing the College. We sent out communication around that decision and let our students, our staff, our faculty, and then, very quickly, our partners, who were coming for events, know about our decision. I was working very closely with the Board of Trustees, keeping them informed about what I was hearing on phone calls with other college presidents throughout Vermont. We were coming together routinely as a team, sharing information, working together with each other to speak for higher education in Vermont with the state and with officials.

And as the spring progressed, life was very different and very strange. I remember being on the third floor of Freeman Hall after the campus was closed. One of my primary goals during that time was to keep in close touch with our community to make sure that folks were receiving not only descriptive emails, to the extent that we could describe the emerging conditions, but that our faculty, staff, and students, that the students' families and caregivers, knew that the College was thinking about them. That we were *really* focused, all the time, on their health and safety, on the sustainability of the College's work, and increasingly, on the planning that was going to be necessary for us to actually conduct the College's important teaching and learning mission in utterly changed circumstances.

And so it was ... it was an extraordinary transformation in what the work of the presidency looked like in very short order. And when I was ... when I was on the third floor of Freeman Hall with my iPhone on a little tripod [holds up cell phone], I decided to make a few short video postcards to send to each of those three groups: to students, to faculty, and to staff. Actually, also to the Board of Trustees. I decided to communicate with the trustees that way as well while I was at it.

And I remember trying to arrange a background – this was in the early days of Zoom before we had the Zoom background situation, where, you know ... before I became more of an expert in video communications in very quick succession. All of which were a huge part of being the Interim President during the spring of 2020.

I was ... I was arranging a Champlain College piece of artwork that featured a campus scene behind me. I was trying to get the lighting right because when the sun sets over the lake the lighting can be very strange and shadowy upstairs in Freeman Hall. And I was working hard to convey what I wanted to share about decision-making processes, and the College's commitment to its people, in a way that would be reassuring to folks during what was a really, really disconcerting and confusing period to be an American, to be an employee, for many of us, to be a parent, [and] to be a teacher. And so it was rewarding to hear back from folks over the weeks that followed how much those video communications had meant to them. And so I'm really glad that my amateur video making and journalistic skills were [laughs] were sufficient to give me the ... to make the decision to go ahead and send out those unscripted and, you know, largely unedited videos just to be able to keep in touch with our community.

Donnis: So, you referenced the decision to close the college campus as a really critical one. Are there other critical decisions that you and your team made in the spring of 2020?

Quinn: Yeah. Gosh, there were lots. Every day we were making a raft of new decisions based on the emerging scientific information, and on information that was coming in about all of the logistics that we would need to pay close attention to.

So, a couple of examples. Study abroad was a huge decision point. Making the very difficult sequence of decisions to bring students home from their study abroad locations, literally around the world. Most of the bulk of our students were in either Dublin, Ireland, Montreal, Canada, or Auckland, New Zealand. And so those were our three largest groups of students. New Zealand was the last decision point we made, to ask those students to return, or to recommend strongly that they return. The New Zealand government managed the crisis exceedingly well, and so the landscape of COVID at that time in [that] country was not as severe as it was here in the U.S., as it was quickly becoming.

And so it was a difficult judgment call. The unpredictability of transmission globally, and the, sort of, rollercoaster of travel restrictions, as they were emerging, made it really difficult to make those decisions in a way that was trying to see around corners for the health and safety of our students, and for the sanity of their families, who were understandably quite worried. So study abroad stands out as a series of complex decisions.

The decision to extend spring break for the traditional [undergraduate] side, and to ask faculty to very quickly to dig deep and be ready within those couple of extra days, plus a week, to move their courses online, and to resume the semester so that academic work would not be so severely impacted.

And so watching our faculty, our librarians, our Center for Teaching and ... Center for Learning and Teaching, our E-Learning team. Watching folks come together and focus tirelessly on that work of

getting ready for our students. I just remember being astonished by what the Provost's Office and the Center for Learning and Teaching in particular, what they were able to stand up during just unbelievably difficult high-pressure circumstances. The trainings that were rolled out, the supports that were very quickly built. Certainly, not all of it went seamlessly, but compared to what I had been hearing, and continue to hear, about the transition at other colleges and universities, I think Champlain has a lot to be proud of in the way that we approached that transition, and the way that our faculty *really*, nearly to a person, put their students first, and got ... got to work. Rolled up their sleeves and got to work very quickly and very diligently in figuring out how best to become online faculty in short order.

So it probably helped us that we have the advantage as an institution of a really robust online program that has been around since the early 1990s. We've ... we have been swimming in that for many years now as an organization at Champlain. But I think that the ... I think that the speed with which that had to happen. As any online education expert will tell you, this is not simple. The principles of strong instructional design really can't be rushed, and yet we had no choice but to rush in creating rapid designs for all kinds of learning, every kind of course we offered. And so that remains in my memory a real point of pride in the Champlain College faculty, and how they rose to that occasion.

I also remember some very long Cabinet conversations, making decisions about housing in particular. And about quarantine. Particularly as we got further into the spring, and had to work through our list of traditional students for whom the idea of simply going home, and staying home for remote learning, just wasn't feasible, for any number of reasons: distance, family situation, economics, health situations. It was a really complex landscape that our Student Affairs team had to navigate. And the compassion and the care with which they did that, while it didn't surprise me based on the folks on that team and who I had had the privilege of working with, it was grueling work. To reach out to each and every student, to get the messages right, to communicate about when and how, and transportation plans, and res hall plans, and later on, health and safety and quarantine plans. How all of that would be implemented.

Gosh, lots of things come to mind. I remember the extraordinary pride in the enrollment team pulling together a virtual ... major virtual recruitment event, nearly overnight, it seemed. And just knocking it out of the park with the quality of that event, the re-creation somehow, in the midst of a really tough time for young people who were looking at college. Our team managed to create, somehow, a real feeling of Champlain College. Students were incorporated in the presentation. It was live and interactive. It included games in a very Champlain sort of way. And the voices of students were really prominent. And, you know, I think some friendships were forged over that virtual event, and that too was a time of real pride. And I think our competence as a higher ed organization that had invested in being innovative and paid attention to cutting-edge technologies, I think those things were in evidence. And that was really terrific to be part of, and to be able to recognize even as we were all working, you know, more than twelve-hour days. And thinking about this around the clock.

Donnis: I'm wondering if you could talk for a moment about a typical day as a college president. Perhaps give us a picture of what that was like before COVID, and then in the spring of 2020, during at least the first phase of the pandemic.

Quinn: Yeah. Well, probably the only ... [laughs], probably the only thing that is consistent in the pre- and the post of COVID, in terms of the life of a college president, is, you know, the scope and complexity and variability of the work, right? There is ... I often ... Sort of the mental model that I used is to think about the vice presidents around the table in each of the areas that they represent. You know, my then leadership team.

And, you know, before COVID, I was leading a lot of strategy work. And so everybody was participating in developing and refining that strategy. A lot of dialogue with our board. And we were doing all of the usual business of the College, right? We were administering budgets and facilities. We were making academic plans, and programs and curriculum were chugging along as they do, especially at Champlain College. We were talking about new models for Academic Affairs, and you know, the work of faculty governance was alive and well. The enrollment machine continued to do its work, and you know, focus on recruiting our next class. The President's Office was deep in planning and thinking about commencement, a ceremony that became a fully virtual commencement. And despite the heartache of that event not being live, our virtual event was a triumph. And was an extraordinary way to end a very difficult academic spring. Advancement continued to tell the Champlain story, work closely with our major donors, build excitement about the future strategy, gain grants wherever we could for the work of our centers and for other initiatives of the College. Let's see, what am I forgetting? Human resources, obviously, the work of our benefits, our pay, and our people, of performance assessment, of training and learning, all of that. And then Student Affairs, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. You know, the heart of our mission, completely transformed from day-to-day student development and care, to full-on crisis management. Front lines. I think about the number of conversations I had before COVID with our medical director, Annika Hawkins-Hilke, and the number I had after COVID. No comparison. Annika and I became very good friends in a very quick amount of time.

The joy of running Champlain College is that as President, you can, if you choose to, be as involved as you want to be, and as present as you want to be, for students, faculty, and staff. The necessity of being involved in those nitty gritty decisions after COVID was undeniable, and absolutely necessary.

I think I was fortunate to have served as Provost before the COVID year hit because knowing the institution and the people, and the names, and the functions at least, during that critical time. Gosh, I can't imagine, for example, trying to work with a new technology vice president. Our Chief Information Officer [Jeff Brown] was an absolute champion in making sure that we could *rapid response* help our faculty and students with hardware. We were tracking who needed better internet in order to be able to access their Champlain education or deliver their Champlain course. We had an extraordinary team that was very committed to getting it right for the community.

So I follow that team as the through line from the before and after part of your question because the hours that one logs with that group, both in normal times as a president and following the emergence of COVID in our lives, that's the common thread. But nearly everything else looked pretty different pretty quickly.

Donnis: I know that you've already referenced the process of transitioning our academic programs to the flex-hybrid model. Or at least, the rapid response of transitioning to the remote model to finish out

the 2020 academic year. Were you involved in planning for the next fall, for the rollout of the flex-hybrid model?

Quinn: Yes. When ... So when President Akande was hired, there was some delay in announcing his hire, just given the news cycle of COVID, and the logistics of just putting together an appropriate celebratory announcement in a really difficult time, and distracting time. And so he and I began working together behind the scenes pretty much right away. And the ability to convey as clearly as I could, you know, what was unfolding, on the ground, and at that time he remained in St. Louis for quite a while before he could safely travel and begin his duties officially. But there was quite a lot of video conferencing, there were a lot of phone meetings, to try to set the College up for success despite the fact that another presidential transition was going to ... going to be part of our summer.

And so that included budget work that ... Of course the College's fiscal year begins July 1, and so there was the usual annual budgeting process thrown into a *major* curve, given the COVID expenses and the extraordinary cost of responding to the pandemic, of having the essential health and safety measures that have carried the College through relatively well to this point in the pandemic. Setting all of that up and coming up with appropriate policies and appropriate communications around all of that, was a massive undertaking.

I think of the work of Katherine Birrow, then Chief of Staff in the President's Office in particular, as absolutely vital. The number of ... the number of communications that Katherine coordinated with Leandre Waldo in our Marketing Department, with our medical director, Annika [Hawkins-Hilke], and innumerable others brought into the conversations as needed, it was daunting. There was a critical communication or two in every single week pretty much from the earliest part of March all the way through, well into the fall.

The Provost's Office developed, under Interim Provost Catherine Morgan, developed a terrific communication vehicle for faculty [the Academic Briefing], which was initially being sent every day or two, and then went to a weekly bulletin. That was extremely helpful, I think, to lots of people.

And it was through the process ... it was through the Provost's Office primarily that the flex-hybrid conversation got rolling. Interim Provost Morgan consulted with our Faculty Senate leadership pretty quickly once we started to see where ... where COVID might go and how much we might need to be in this for a while. There was an initial consultation, and then a drafting out with some of our other administrators and deans and experts from different pockets across the College. What would an appropriate format look like, and how would it work for both the critical issue of faculty teaching styles and preferences, and the reality that we needed a model that was essentially, you know, sort of discipline proof. It needed to work for multiple subjects.

And you know, we were having some pretty intense conversations about the role that equity and diversity and inclusion played, as faculty began to understand so differently. You know, just as those of us working, and parenting, and worrying about loved ones, and figuring out our lives during the pandemic, just as we got to know each other very differently, from seeing each other's Zoom

backgrounds and ... [laughs] I have a memory of Jeff Brown, our Chief Information Officer, you know, his cat walking ... the first time his cat walked across his keyboard as we were having a cabinet meeting. And you know, our faculty were talking with great compassion about some of our students' learning environments. Right? No longer under our control. No longer something that we could promise our students. The stability of a well-equipped classroom or a thoughtfully planned, you know, 50-minute session or hour and a half, or what have you. You know, I think about our students who live with extended family, or whose families are not living in safe and stable conditions. I think that the combination of the racial reckoning in the U.S., in the summer [of 2020] in particular, and the pandemic, and how it shaped what higher education looked like, I think those two things coming together, my hope is that that has created a conversation and an awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Champlain that has, I would say, finally deepened, and might sustain itself in ways that I think were much needed.

Donnis: What do you feel has been your greatest achievement during the pandemic?

Quinn: [pause for reflection] I'm ... I'm proud to have led the community. It really isn't a single person achievement. It is a community achievement that's the source of my pride. I am ... I am moved to remember how hard everybody worked. And also much of a ... How much we managed to be a community at Champlain through all of that disruption, *and* through a time when no one knew what the rules were going to be. And so the trust and the caring that characterizes the Champlain community really did show up. It was everywhere. And so I think ... [chuckles] Somebody said to me, "Who on earth bargains for this during their interim presidency?" And while that's absolutely true—it does at times, you know, sort of read like a very bad punchline to a one-year commitment. I will say, I'm glad I was in the seat, because it allowed me to make sure that our community was cared for at a critical time. And yeah, I would do that again, despite all the ... [laughs] despite all the hours and the very bumpy ride. Well worth it, to know that the people that make Champlain Champlain were connected to each other during that time.

Donnis: How has the pandemic affected you personally?

Quinn: Truth be told, my life is pretty privileged compared to how the pandemic has affected many people. I don't work at Champlain College anymore, but I have a job that I love, and I am healthy, and my loved ones are safe and healthy. So the honest answer is the pandemic has only sharpened my gratitude for that reality and my recognition of how necessary it is for others to have those fundamentals of health and safety and wellbeing, peace of mind, economic basic security, among other essentials. And for me, as a very passionate educator, and advocate for the power of education, that essential set of rights includes the right to an education.

Donnis: When you look back on the years 2020 and 2021, at least insofar as we've gotten in 2021, what do you think you'll remember the most, and why?

Quinn: Gosh. That's a wonderful question that I don't have a ... I don't have a clear answer to. I guess my best working theory, is that I will remember ... I will remember particular people and the contributions that they made. I mentioned a number of them today, but by no means all of them. I will also remember being part of a very specific period in Champlain College's history. Part of a set of chapters that cover

the time when I was Provost and ending with my interim presidency, that I hope will be seen as a time of renewal of commitment to mission. Sort of ... a carrying forward of some of the best of our legacy with a kind of courage to also ... to do some new things. And regardless of what that particular strategy or set of operations actually looks like, to do it in a particular way. In a way that is characterized by real conversation, by good ideas, by smart people coming together to do hard work, and good work.

And you know, by a recognition of the interdependence of everybody in the Champlain community, both with one another and with the surrounding community. I mean, that is the other huge lesson of this pandemic, of course. We have always been at Champlain College part of a neighborhood and part of the Burlington community in much more visible ways than some other colleges. But one of the things that higher education learned, during this ... 2020 and 2021 period of the pandemic is, you cannot separate your organization, or your mission, from the community in which you are embedded. The pandemic brought that home in some very painful ways for lots of colleges and universities. But it also, I think, helped Champlain demonstrate what that could look like under the best of conditions of really thinking about our neighbors and our community and the vulnerable around the College, even as we were making decisions about our own students and faculty and staff. So the fact that that was possible I think is a real victory and something to remember.

Donnis: How do you think the pandemic will affect higher education moving forward?

Quinn: I'm worried for higher education. I know even in the period from early March through the end of June, when I was actively in leadership at the College, the fiscal situation, the impact of COVID-related costs, and the preexisting condition of higher education finance, the model that we work in, in higher education, is not a sustainable model. A number of us in higher ed leadership have been making that point for many years. COVID has now cracked that situation wide open. Such that a number of colleges and universities will be vulnerable to closure. The demographic trends that were beginning to show up in enrollment at virtually any institution that was not in the absolute top tier of selectivity, those things are now manifest across the college and university landscape in ways that will be really difficult to recover from when you add COVID. And so I worry about that dimension of higher ed sustainability.

What I don't worry about is the continued commitment to college teaching that matters, and the continued commitment to students' learning goals, to their thriving as human beings. Those things in my experience in the profession of higher education, there are enough institutions where those beliefs and those traits run deep enough, that they're going to be bigger than COVID. They will last longer than the terrible impact of the pandemic on the sector.

And I continue to believe that the transformation that college represents to so many of our students continues to be a very clear call to the value of college, even though I am, and have been for many years, impatient with the pace of reinvention and innovation that would make college more accessible to more students and more valuable to those who do attend. I think, what brought me to Champlain originally in 2014, the mission, and the approach, to a college education, that Champlain represents, those things have enduring power. They do. And so while I am worried for higher education generally, I am hopeful for Champlain specifically. That the strength of that mission and the extraordinary talents of

the people who carry it out every day, and the irresistibility of helping our students achieve their dreams, that those things will all only pick up steam into the post-COVID future. That's my hope.

Donnis: So we've come to the end of my prepared questions. Is there anything else that you would like to speak to us about?

Quinn: You know, I would say that institutions are bigger than individuals by their design. That is appropriate and healthy, and I wouldn't change that. But I will say that the team of individuals that I worked with in Champlain leadership during the moment that you're capturing, in this interview conversation, is a team of people whose contributions and whose names deserve to be remembered. The extraordinary service represented by the leadership team at the time, and by lots of people who led without being on the leadership team, is something I very much hope that the project will help to preserve and celebrate for many years to come. So I appreciate the chance to participate.

Donnis: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Quinn: My pleasure.

[end of recording]