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An Interview with Provost Stacey Robertson

Marley DeRosia

I had the pleasure of interviewing SUNY Geneseo's new provost and vice president of academic affairs, Stacey Robertson, on February 28, 2018. She assumed her role in June of 2017 and I was excited to pick the brain of someone who had never experienced Geneseo's annual research event. I initially asked to interview Provost Robertson through email, and she replied with great enthusiasm at the opportunity despite never having attended GREAT Day before. When we sat in her office, the bowl of mixed M&M's placed in front of me broke the ice. A few shared laughs later, I began to ask her my questions.

What are you looking forward to this upcoming GREAT Day?

Provost Robertson: Student creativity and innovation, my friend! I am looking forward to experiencing first-hand what our students are doing in relation to all these amazing research programs I've heard so much about. It's amazing; I feel like the best thing we can do for our students is provide them with opportunities to take what they learned inside the classroom and apply it outside the classroom. It is the strongest correlation with student success in college; it's the ability for us to provide our students the opportunity to do that and GREAT Day is the ultimate manifestation of taking what you've learned inside the classroom and applying it outside the classroom. I'm just really eager, in particular, I'm very interested in creativity and innovation.

How important do you think student research is to campus?

Critical. It's absolutely critical. And I assume by research you're defining it broadly, so it's not just the sciences! What we do at an institution like Geneseo, we don't just say, "Hey, learn about European history and you get to go off and teach history in high school," right? That is so not what we do! First of all, we teach you how to learn, so you become a lifelong learner and develop all of those incredibly important skills which allow you to make choices in your life with power, with knowledge, with information, and with confidence. That is what we do for you and that is what research does for you; it enhances your own independent, creative critical thinking, it enhances your leadership, it enhances your confidence level. Because you're engaging in the research! You are the one applying that knowledge base that you got from that biology course or your history course, your English course, or your accounting course and you're putting that in action. You are being an historian! You're being a biologist! That is so empowering in so many different ways. It's priceless, frankly. If we're not doing that, we're not doing our job. Research is critical to who we are as an institution. Frankly, we have the very best faculty, the very best staff to help our students do that. I mean, within the last few weeks, our geography department won best geography department in the nation. Our library? Best library in the nation. These are not minor awards and they're deeply linked with our ability to conduct and provide research opportunities for our students.

Have you seen similar undergraduate research symposiums like GREAT Day in your professional career?

I've been at two previous institutions as a historian at Bradley University where I spent 21 years as a U.S Women's Historian and also as the director of the Women's Studies program. There, Bradley also has a GREAT Day type of event and they've had it for 20 years, but I'm telling you right now, it was nowhere near [that of GREAT Day]. First of all, we never canceled classes. Second of all, it maybe got 10% of student

participation, not 25% like we have here—it's amazing! So totally not, in terms of participation. I mean, it was transformative for our students but not as many people participated. Same thing at Central Washington University. They also had—in their case it was a day and a half—but again, classes were not canceled. It was not an institutional event the way that it is at Geneseo. I think the fact that we cancel classes is very unique and very Geneseo. So yeah, both of those two institutions did have it but it just was not what it is here.

Did you do any undergraduate research yourself? Did you have the opportunity to present it in a similar setting?

As an undergraduate, I went to a small liberal arts college, Whittier College, which is in Whittier California in the Los Angeles area. I was very fortunate in that there was a program there which is called the Whittier Scholars Program, which is basically a kind of “design your own major” program. This was a program in which your first class that you took as a Whittier Scholar student was called “What are human beings?” That was one of the best classes I ever took in my life. The last class you took as a senior was called “What is reality?” So your education is bookended by “What are human beings?” and “What is reality?” and how awesome is that? They required us to have a senior project and that senior project could be of your own choosing related to your created major or not, whatever you wanted, and in the end, I actually had a very interesting experience.

Originally, I was very interested in women and art. Although I was not an art major, I wanted to do a project with a women's center, which was a women's art collective in downtown Los Angeles where I was just going to go experience and write about that women's center. There were structural issues that made it really hard for me to follow up on that project so I ended up changing my project and deciding to do a historian's project. I had an advisor that said, “Hey, you know Stacey, there's a collection of letters in the library. They're housed in a Nike shoebox. You might want to take a look at those. It's really cool, they're called the Pillsbury family letters and you're interested in family history so go check them out.” Well, I went and checked it out: I fell in love with this family, in particular, Parker Pillsbury, who was the husband in this family. Turns out he was a very famous abolitionist—nobody had ever written on him. He became my senior project. He became my dissertation. And he became my first book.

Did you have the opportunity to present it in a GREAT Day-like setting?

In the Whittier Scholars Program, we had a tradition of having a seniors' night and so all of us would present our projects at a big formal dinner that we had. It was a great opportunity to engage in public dissemination of your scholarship, much like what we do at GREAT Day, so I learned a lot from that, but it was nothing like GREAT Day, I mean, there were 25 of us presenting and it's just a much smaller environment so it's nothing like what happens here but it was inspiring for me. So, for me, GREAT Day is the ultimate manifestation of that opportunity to share your intellectual work in a public forum which allows you to develop all kinds of skills: oral communication skills, problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, terrific things all in one day.

How do you think GREAT Day fosters creativity on the college campus?

You know, the whole thing about research is that no one is telling you what to do. I mean, research projects are, by their very nature, an exemplar of your independent thinking. It's problem solving even if it's a poetry reading or something more traditionally “creative.” It's about creative, intellectual problem solving at its very best. It encourages students to think outside the box. It encourages you to think about yourself in relation to the world in new and interesting ways. I think one of the things we worry about in our education is the extent to which we are able to provide our students with the skills that will outlast what the latest technological revolution is that will foresee careers of the future. But here's what I say: if we teach students, if we allow opportunities for our students to hone their creativity skills, that can never be replaced. That can never be mechanized. It's never going to go out of fashion. If you think about technology and the things that we worry



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about—Apple is all about creativity. We cannot divorce the mechanics of design from the creativity of design; they have to be in conversation. Our students in learning how to be creative through their own hands, in their own thinking, in their own engagement with other students and with faculty, those are the priceless skills they're going to remember. They're going to remember their GREAT Day project. In 10, 20 years, they're not going to remember the one little class—they'll forget a lot of things. But they're always going to remember their GREAT Day project. They will. Creativity is at the heart of it all.



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