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Leone Low interview, Instructor Emeritus, College of Science and Mathematics, Wright State University

Marlene Bireley
Wright State University - Main Campus

Leone Low
Wright State University - Main Campus

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview date: February 18, 2002

Interviewer: Marlene Birely
Emeritus, College of Education and Human Services

Interviewee: Leone Low
Emeritus, College of Science and Mathematics

MB: This is Dr. Marlene Birely, professor emeritus of the College of Education and Human Services. Today I am interviewing Dr. Leone Low, professor emeritus, Department of Mathematics, College of Science and Mathematics. The date is February 18, 2002. Thank you for coming this morning, and the first thing I'd like to have you do is tell us about your personal background, and how you came to Wright State in the early days.

LL: I received three degrees, the first one was from Oklahoma A&M, and the second two were from Oklahoma State University, but it was all the same place. I was sort of roped into the PHD. Program, I had fellowships to go elsewhere, I had a Sigma Xi fellowship, and an NSF fellowship. But they had been very nice to me at Oklahoma State, and said that they really couldn't have a PHD. Program unless I stayed, because they needed to have four students. But very quickly we did have more than four students, but I did stay at Oklahoma State and had an excellent dissertation advisor, who was later president of the American Statistical Association. Actually, after he gave me a problem and I worked on it diligently and finished it. In fact, the first problem he gave me was unsolvable, so I came up with a counter example. The second problem I finished, and he said, "Well, you have enough for a PHD dissertation, but you are such a good student, I want to give you this problem". [Laughs] And it turned out that this problem- I didn't know it at the time and didn't find out until maybe twenty some odd years later- was one that the great C.R. Rao had actually looked at and had not solved. Of course, I'm sure he didn't give it, didn't spend his lifetime trying to work it, but consequently my work, my solution to the problem, was always listed in all bibliographies having anything to do with the area, because C.R. Rao had a lot of influence. I was also, later on, invited to a number of research conferences for the famous and still active C.R. Rao, because I was able to work with the problem. My husband was although we were the same age, he was behind me because I was able to finish college in three years, and march right through to my doctoral dissertation. So he wanted to get a doctorate, and our chairman, who was very grandfatherly to us, was able to get him into the very prestigious math program at the University of Illinois. It was regularly listed in the top-five math PHD programs in the country. So I was to teach and he was to go to school, and this was what we did. So we were at the University of Illinois for four years where I had a number of teaching experiences. I taught mathematical statistics four or five times, I taught a PHD level

course in my field, and I served on doctoral committees. So this was my professional experience before coming to Wright State.

MB: Thank you. Once you came to Wright State, what would you say was your most memorable early experience?

LL: My most memorable early experience was the first day. We went into Allyn Hall, which was not yet finished, and to what was then called a multi-purpose room. It later became the administrative wing. This was this huge room which was unfinished; there were a lot of tables in the room, and we were to advise and enroll students. One of my first students was this child who had been number 629 in his class of [??], and almost cried when I enrolled this child. All easy courses, his highest grade was one C in physical education. He flunked out the first semester.

MB: That's a little bit different than teaching PHD students.

LL: It was.

MB: What was the date that you came?

LL: Our contracts were dated July 1, 1964. This was maybe August 1, I don't remember the exact day.

MB: Wright State was still just a branch campus at that point?

LL: It was 1964, a branch campus, and we were Ohio State faculty members. Occasionally Dean Moulton would come and give us a pep talk, and one of the things he said, which actually caused a lot of resentment later, was he assured us that all of this work that we were going to do, to develop curriculum, to develop courses, would be counted towards our subsequent promotions and so forth, that we would not be punished for the fact that we were having to take time away from our research to do this, and this turned out to be untrue. That was one of the things we did.

The first year, I had a very strange teaching schedule. I was teaching math for elementary education majors, and the textbook did not come in for six weeks. I had not chosen this textbook, in fact I didn't even have a copy, but I had students. So I wrote out some notes, [and] we did set theory. Finally, after about four or five weeks, the person who had chosen the textbook did lend me his copy, and so then I did notes out of that, then finally the textbooks came in. Our poor students, the answers, at least ten percent of the answers were wrong. So, um, I would say to them, [pause], they would come in and say they disagreed with the answers, and we would work it out and the students would be right, and I said, "Well, I'm glad that you're getting this self-reliance. You have seen that you have to depend on yourself and not on the answer book". Of course, it would have helped if I had worked the problems in advance, but I was also teaching in the night schedule, to the Ohio State Extension students, a senior/graduate level course in statistics, which I had

taught before at the University of Illinois four or five times. I was able to pick the book on this, so I very much knew what I was doing in this course, it was quite familiar to me.

I was also teaching an advanced analysis course, and this was the highest level math course I was ever allowed to teach, of course, I had taught all the pre-requisites for the course. I wanted to be sure that they were going to get the same kind of education that the Ohio State students got, because this was an Ohio State course. I went in and talked with the then chairman of the Math Dept. at Ohio State, [and] tried to get the syllabus for the course. He said, "Well, there is no syllabus". So I said, "What am I supposed to cover?", and he said, "Well, you have a book.... Cover what you want to". [So] I went in, and the book was somewhat deficient in examples. So for every lecture, every theorem, I was having to make up my own examples, which is a lot of work, a lot of work. Counter-examples, which are examples where the theorem doesn't hold, and you should avoid using the theorem, and, of course, examples of cases where you could use the theorem, and then assigned homework. So I was grading homework for about forty students in my math for elementary education [course], about forty students in my mathematical statistics [course], and about thirty students in my advanced analysis course. These courses met two days a week, um... math for elementary education met Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the other two courses met two days a week, I think. The funny part about it was they alternated times. In other words, one of them was first one of the two days, and second [on] the other day. Well, one day I went in and started lecturing, and the only student who was in both classes, comes up and says, "Dr. Lowe, wrong class!" [Laughs]

MB: I think you've touched on it, but do you have any more comments about the role of the faculty in those early days, in course development, strange teaching methods, was there anything else you would like to add to that?

LL: Well, we all ate lunch up on the 4th floor, in a very large lounge. But we had to bring our lunches, because there was no food service on campus. So, we'd give each other pep talks, you know, "We are going to make this a very strong college. We have to really go in, and if students do not measure up, we have to fail them." People would say this all the time and almost everyone, if not everyone, had taught at places like Ohio State, the University of Illinois, and knew [what] standards were supposed to be, and I think they flunked out half the student body the first term, and I'm sure Mr. 629 was one of those. The son of the then president of the Board of Trustees finished the quarter with a 0.0 grade point average, so there were no favors played. We also had a lot of interaction with people who were not mathematicians because of this lounge, and it was really a really great experience because we could talk to people in Education, and Liberal Arts, and not just Science and Engineering. So this was really great, and this was one of the things that all of us missed whenever we later were able to separate out into another building.

MB: Okay, this is sort of a strange question. I'm not sure how I'd answer it, but what was the character of Wright State over the years?

LL: Well, you're not going to like my answer, because, [pause], 1964 was the year that the civil rights law was passed which gave equal rights to women. This was also the year that Wright State opened. So, it took quite a few years for this to actually become the real, actual law of the land, and to some extent it still is not. So, one of the things that they did against discrimination against women, which, these cases did not apply to me personally and I won't go into some of the cases that did, but our secretary became pregnant, so they discharged her. Not right away, but she was not allowed to take a leave of absence, and so whenever [pause], and we were about the only department that had a dedicated secretary at the time, she was a wonderful person. So, whenever she was able to come back, the administration was going to start her back at the beginning wages and not give her her seniority. Fortunately, this injustice did not actually come to pass. Also, Margaret Roach, who was a librarian, and later was one of the few librarians ever granted tenure at Wright State, was in the same situation. She had another child and so she was discharged, was not given a leave of absence, and then she consequently came back and later got tenure.

When I went to go, the first case that involved me was in '68-69, [or], '67-68, I received a National Academy of Sciences Postdoctoral Associateship, at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. This meant that I would have my salary paid for 12 months and had a full research grant. And I was, like, [pause], so I was at Wright-Patt Air Force Base, and the first day I got there, I'm in at 8 o'clock [and] I couldn't get in, no one else was there [laughs], but we worked out little things like that. But I wanted Wright State to pay my, to contribute towards retirement for me, to contribute towards STRS for me, because they had done it for a known number of the faculty in our department who had taken a leave of absence for a teaching situation in another university the year before. But they refused to do this. But I did enjoy my stay at Wright-Patt, and the stress of getting my research off the ground, I modified, I revised one paper while I was there and wrote another one, and was beginning to start on some other things, and they offered me a second year on this fellowship. But meanwhile I had gotten tenure at Wright State, and the Statistics Department was putting young people who should not have been teaching, I mean, the Math Department was putting in people who should not have been teaching Statistics. In fact, we lost a big course because someone else went in and flunked out almost everyone. A course which I myself had taught a number of times at the University of Illinois, and I think I might have, if I had taught it myself, managed to put people through at Wright State, they were actually just as good as, probably anyway, as the Engineering students at University of Illinois. So, I did not take this second year fellowship. I will also add that after our first year at Wright State, my husband and I had two job offers to go to PHD granting schools. You know, you may not think these were the best, but they had PHD programs. He felt that his future would be better at Wright State, and I'm sure he was right.

MB: Perhaps you've already touched on this one as well, but describe the role of the administration during these early years of the university.

LL: Well, I had a family, and my son was born in May, and I started at Wright State in July. So I tried to avoid as much time at Wright State in what I considered to be non-research or non-teaching activities. So I actually stayed away from administration as much as possible. I did get pressure to teach and threatened that my professional career would suffer, unquote, if I didn't teach in the summer, because I was the only person who was really qualified to teach Statistics and [???], but I refused to do so, so they just didn't offer the courses. But that was my only direct contact.

MB: You already talked about the close relationship with colleagues. What was the relationship with the students?

LL: Um, [pause], I didn't have a close relationship with the students at all. I had been brought up, my father had taught in a college, and I had been brought up that students were students and faculty were faculty. So, I was always willing to talk to them, but being the only woman faculty member, often I was the only woman in class, in the classes I was teaching or taking when I was a student. So there was sort of a, [pause], they weren't really used to the fact that a woman would teach at the university level. So I would have to say that, [pause], I didn't, quote, have trouble with the students in the classroom or anything, but I don't think we were friends, either. Now, some of the people were friends, in fact, one of the men was so friendly that one of the girls had a baby, but I'm afraid that I did not, was not real close to the students.

MB: Okay, let us compare your department or college in terms of how it was then and how it has grown or not grown to the present day.

LL: Well, the growth has been wonderful. We've been able to give many more courses, able to give many more majors, and to turn out students who are very capable, well, they were capable before, they just had to do a lot of on the job learning [laughs] whenever they went out. But we tried to do well what we did, and we did not try to do the things we couldn't do. And now a lot of these things can be done.

MB: Okay, this is what I call the Barbara Walters question...

LL: Okay [laughs]

MB: ...If you were asked to describe WSU then, in one word, what would it be?

LL: [Laughs] Ambitious.

MB: And, if you were asked to describe WSU now, in one word, what would that word be?

LL: I think they have more problems now than we had then, in many ways.

MB: If you had the opportunity to do something over, in your tenure at Wright State, what would it be?

LL: I think I would definitely have taken a second year of research, [laughs].

MB: You're still thinking about that one.

LL: Right [laughs].

MB: Okay, do you have any thoughts on how university student attitudes towards education have changed in the years since the middle 1960's?

LL: Um, [pause], after I left Wright State in '88, one of my colleagues told me that I had left at the right time, that the students were much more aggressive in the classroom. He thought that things had gotten much worse in the classroom, [and] that was his opinion.

MB: So you don't have-

LL: Actually, one of the reasons, there were a lot of reasons I decided to retire in my very, very early 50's, but one of them was the fact that we had this course that I taught a lot, in fact I told the chairman, "I know no one wants to teach this course, but I will take it, one course every quarter, but no more". One of the saving graces of that was [that] we had the Engineering Psychology, or what was called the Human Factors students, in that course. So we were guaranteed a base of very good students, and they were going to take those students out of the course. So, after a certain amount, if I didn't have any other reason to resign, that was the one.

MB: Okay, share your thoughts on the major challenges in higher education today and how is this affecting Wright State.

LL: Well, the Math Department, through the years, the people there seemed to think that they were getting students who were less and less prepared from high school. So, all the people at the Ivy League school that my daughter attended [that] don't have to worry so much, occasionally they understand that they do have remedial problems. We've had to do a lot of remediation at Wright State, especially in the Math Department and the English Department. Students are becoming more aggressive in the high schools, and a place such as Wright State is going to have those problems. So I am glad that I only had one incident where I thought I might get killed in the classroom, but managed to walk over and convince the guy he didn't want to commit violence on anyone. But I know that some of my colleagues, in not only the Math Department but other departments, had [??] committed upon them, male colleagues, [??].

MB: Okay, we've pretty well gotten through the questions, are there any additional thoughts or other questions that I should have asked you but I didn't that you'd like to comment on?

LL: Um... I mentioned discrimination against women, there was also discrimination against women students. I had, one time I taught a course for [pause], um, Computer Option, Math Computing Option, for Computer Science students. The person who had had the course before me was an excellent teacher, but no one could pass the course. So, knowing that he had problems teaching the course, I knew that what he was being told to do had to be totally wrong, because if it was doable he would have done it. So, I just went in and looked [it] over credit wise and re-did the course, and went in and asked about everybody.

I had, there were two girl students in this class who were always together. They were bosom buddies. I was asked to give one of them a job as my grader, and I found that she was the weaker of the two students, in my opinion. So I went in and looked up her record and found out a little bit, she did have a good enough record that I could put her as a grader. While I was at it, I looked at her buddy's scores, her record, and saw that I was justified in feeling that she was the stronger student; she was actually a very strong student. Then I saw that she was taking all these Computer Science courses, in fact they both were. But she was only going to get a Math Computing Option degree, which was much weaker, and so I thought, "This is strange". The very next person to her in Algebra was a man, and he was taking exactly the same courses, making one or two grades lower in every course, except maybe one or two. She had more than a full grade point higher than he had, taking exactly the same courses, and he was going to get the prestigious Computer Science degree. So I asked her about it, I said, "Why aren't you getting a Computer Science degree?" She said, "Well, I'm not going to mention the advisor's name, [he] won't let me, but he's going to help me to get a Math Computer Options degree". I said, "Well, you're going to have more trouble getting a job with that degree", and I said, "We would both get into trouble, but I would back you on this if you want to fight it". She was frantic. She was frightened.

MB: That's interesting. By experiencing education and some instance in your experience is primarily a man-run situation...

LL: Right, well, this particular person, I later heard he'd had other complainers.

MB: That's interesting that you could be at the same place, and have such a different experience.

LL: Well, I could go on and on and on and on, and on and on, but I think that this is sort of indicative of what was going on at the time.

MB: Well, thank you very much for sharing your experiences.