

Transcript of Interview with Sara Ronis by Grace Ibarra

Interviewee: Sara Ronis

Interviewer: Grace Ibarra

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Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: Lily Crigler

Abstract: Dr. Sara Ronis, a theology professor at St. Mary's University, gives a faculty perspective on how she believes the university handled the COVID-19 pandemic. She discusses the change in learning caused by the pandemic and talks about how she changed her class to accommodate her students.

Grace Ibarra 00:01

Okay, so um, how long have you been a professor at St. Mary's? What do you teach? And how has your experience been so far?

Sara Ronis 00:09

Great question. So this is my sixth year of teaching at St. Mary's. I'm in the theology department. And in theology, I teach the, the required intro to theology course. And I also teach courses in the Hebrew Bible, and how later communities have read it and made meaning from it. And I, I am a big fan of our St. Mary's students, I think I've, I've continually been really impressed by our students' commitment, and diligence and authenticity, and willingness to explore some really big questions. And, you know, I think what many people are taught, don't talk about religion and politics, you know, in public. And in our classes, we asked people to do a lot of talking about religion and how it relates to politics in public, and I've just been very impressed by everyone's B game.

Grace Ibarra 01:04

Yeah, it's definitely, we always have our own little input. And I guess, because we're so diverse, we don't really, you know, have that kind of filter to us. We're just kind of like, you know, this is what we think. Yeah. Okay. So on to the next question. Have you always wanted to be a professor? And why? Or why not?

Sara Ronis 01:24

So the truth of the matter is, the answer is yes, I have always wanted to be a professor. And that is, in large part because my dad is a professor. So my dad is a professor, or a retired professor of physical chemistry. And so I kind of always knew that this was a job that existed in the world. And so that, really, and I think some large percentage of professors actually are the children of people with PhDs, it's, it's, I don't remember the numbers, I should have looked it up before, but so I always knew, this was a job. And I was always really excited to teach and learn from other people in community. I mean, if you, if you find the thing that will pay you to do the thing that you love doing anyways, that always, that is a real gift.

Grace Ibarra 02:21

It's always an added bonus.

Sara Ronis 02:23

Yeah.

Grace Ibarra 02:24

For sure. So obviously, you love this whole idea of, you know, teaching and learning in the community. And that was obviously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. So how do you feel the university actually handled the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sara Ronis 02:43

That's a good question. You know, I think all universities have just been in a really difficult position. Because for a long period of time, we just didn't know a lot about how COVID was transmitted. And different governmental bodies were giving different kinds of guidance and information. And so I have a lot of, I have a lot of empathy for the folks who are making really complicated decisions with different messages coming at them from different kinds of politicians and different scientists and different students' families and different professors. I don't know anybody who didn't... or none of my, none of my colleagues at other institutions feel like anybody got it 100% right. And I think that's because universities are made up of people, and people are limited by the kinds of knowledge that we have.

Grace Ibarra 03:50

Yes, absolutely. So, um, when we were struck by the COVID-19 pandemic, and kind of got sent home, what are some of the things that you immediately thought to do to support your students? And how did you feel that made an impact on them?

Sara Ronis 04:05

Yeah, so thinking back, I kind of knew during spring break that there was a possibility that we would not be coming back to school in person. And so actually, during spring break, I sent a survey to students in all my classes asking what their WiFi setup was, what kind of technology they had, wherever they were for spring break, to get it so that I can start planning based on the resources that our students have. You know, I could start planning what class could look like. And so that actually was very helpful for me in terms of thinking about what things could look like going forward. That first semester I shifted largely to asynchronous classes. Enough of the students didn't have a setup, really, that would allow for synchronous classes at wherever they were, that it didn't seem equitable to expect folks to do that. And so I shifted largely to an asynchronous class with some pretty regular synchronous check ins. And students tended to really, I think, appreciate both the flexibility. And then also the asynchronous check ins, as we were all going through this.

Grace Ibarra 05:35

Yeah, for sure.

Sara Ronis 05:36

Yeah. I mean, I would say, yes, there were students who really thrived, shifting to asynchronous actually, and I'm sure you know, there are people who have lots of thoughts about things but

don't like to talk in class. And so shifting to discussion boards is a way to invite certain people to share really cool thinking that they don't necessarily feel comfortable sharing otherwise. But it's also, means that students who were excited and thrived in the in class setting, maybe, you know, that wasn't what they were looking to do. And so definitely, definitely things were different in the second half of the semester... is, in way, some ways that I could anticipate and definitely in some ways that I couldn't

Grace Ibarra 06:31

I think that definitely goes for all of us. And then we've kind of started making that transition to come back to synchronous and in person classes, and we had all these new policies in place. And they're actually like changing I think, every semester, like they were tailored specifically for fall 2020, spring 2021. And so a lot of professors had to add something new to their syllabus. And so my next question is, was adding the new mask policy to your syllabus one of the first major changes you've made? Or do you constantly change your syllabi every semester?

Sara Ronis 07:07

Yeah, you know, I do change my syllabi every semester. ...Certain days that tend to be consistent, right, no matter what the upper level courses, do a day on what is the Bible before we jump in. But in general, I tend to switch things up. And during the pandemic, I switched things up pretty intensively. So that fall where we knew we were going to be at home, I, I designed my courses almost entirely asynchronously. And then I realized that that wasn't quite working for the kinds of classes that I wanted to teach, for the kinds of engagement that I wanted us to have in those classes. So in the spring, I went to fully synchronous but online. And that was a different jam. And so then in the fall, this fall, when we came back to on campus, again, switched things up. Some of it was just switching up topics, some of it was switching up policies and some was switching up assignments. I mean, I think one thing that we all need to be aware of, is that things are really hard right now for a lot of people. A lot of people, students and faculty and staff and our families and our loved ones and our friends, a lot of grief and trauma over the last two years. And so thinking, being sure I put in the university mask policy. And we're required to have that, so you know, sure, I'm happy to put that in. But part of it's also how can we build in grace and empathy? Right? How can we be kind to each other in this moment where somebody might not be able to get an assignment in on time, because God forbid, they have to go to a funeral, or a memorial, or visit somebody in the hospital, or take care of family members who are still home. And so all of that shaped how I thought about assignments, and how I thought about deadlines, and how I thought about just what it means for classes to be a place where a bunch of humans with full lives outside of the classroom, come together for 75 minutes to learn something new.

Grace Ibarra 09:52

Yes; it's definitely been a particular experience. And so that kind of moves onto my last question, which is what is one thing that you've noticed the most that has changed from before the pandemic to after? Or quote unquote, during the pandemic here at St. Mary's?

Sara Ronis 10:15

Do you mean for students, for faculty, for staff?

Grace Ibarra 10:19

Anything. Any major change that you've noticed the most.

Sara Ronis 10:23

Yeah, I would say I think students are really different now. Our students, I noticed this particularly in the intro courses, where students have always in those, in those 1000 level courses, students have always been learning material, but also learning what it means to be in college. And the courses are designed to do that, right, if that makes complete sense, but students for the last year and a half whether they were in high school, or whether they were already at St. Mary's, were online. And so now students are learning yes, how to be in college, and yes, they're learning theology, but they're also relearning how to be in the classroom in person. And this is really hard, I think, for brains, right. I mean, I'm not a neuroscientist, but my understanding is that brains want us to survive. And we shifted to online because that was what was safe. And for those of us who are back on campus, it worked for us, right. We are, we are able to come back to campus. And so that switch to say, okay, this thing kept you safe and alive for the last year and a half, and now we're going to leave it aside and go back to the thing before that you were told for the last year and a half was dangerous. I think that adds a level of adjustment and stress, which is just like a low hum under all of the learning. And I think it's profoundly human. One of the things that I think is really important about, about Catholic higher education, is that it really focuses on educating the whole person. And so we pay attention to folks, minds and, and spirits and bodies and brains and all of that stuff, but I definitely see more challenges in adjusting in for students who are starting college now.

Grace Ibarra 12:37

Yeah, definitely. Thank you so much, Dr. Ronis. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me. And the COVID archive also thanks you and future researchers.

Sara Ronis 12:48

You're quite welcome, Grace, and I will see you later.

Grace Ibarra 12:51

Yes ma'am. Oh, I also have a quick question. Let me just... [recording stops]