

Linda Kahan
Interviewed by Susan Fiksdal
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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Begin Part 1 of 2 of Linda Kahan on 9-21-17

Fiksdal: I'm with Linda Kahan on September 21, 2017.

Kahan: Last day of summer.

Fiksdal: Last day of summer 2017. Linda, I thought it would be interesting to talk about what brought you to college, and a science education.

Kahan: Okay. So, what brought me to college was, ever since I was kid, like probably in kindergarten, I knew I was going to college. That was, education was extremely important in my family, and I was encouraged—or bribed—to get good grades, do well in school, with the goal that I should go to college. The end result, of course, would be to get a high-quality husband. [laughing] It was. Well, when I was little, it was the '40s. Okay? So, I did.

I went to Pomona College for a year. I was—I didn't think I could do science, even though at least the biology classes I had in high school were—I really enjoyed them. But it was, by then, the 1950s, and still, science was really not a goal on the horizon for women, or girls. So, I went to college. I had been in a program at my high school, which was considered experimental at the time, where they let 20 of us go to UCLA part-time. It was the first time it had been done. And I took a life-changing course in world literature, and another in German. I'd been studying Spanish in high school. So, at that point—and I was doing well in those classes. I was thinking, well, maybe I'll study foreign languages or something.

So, I went—and the reason I wasn't—one of the reasons I wasn't even thinking science was, unfortunately, one of the better teachers I had in high school had just mentioned in an offhand remark that he had been a biology major, but physics was impossible, and he couldn't do it. And, you know, immediately, I thought, okay, well, that's that for me. If he can't do physics, I certainly couldn't.

So, I get to—so I was at Pomona. I took a regular freshman curriculum there. Continued with German. I don't think I took any Spanish while I was there. But anyhow, by that time, I thought, well, maybe I'll be a German major or something.

That year, while I was in college, my dad had a heart attack. And so, I basically had to change schools. I hadn't been terribly happy at Pomona anyhow. So, I had to change schools, and so I applied

to Berkeley. And I go to Berkeley, and they have a catalog that's probably an inch thick, with every potential major under the sun. And I go through the catalog. Hm. A, anthropology. Nope. A, art. No. Botany. No. I don't know. Basket-weaving. No. [laughing] Chemistry. No. Physics. No. German. Possibly.

But anyhow, I got to Z, zoology, and I hadn't really settled on a major, and I thought, well, I always liked my biology class, and I'm not going through this catalog again, so I'll be a zoology major. [laughter] So, I had none of the prerequisites.

I did take—I took German, I think, that first year, and that quickly disabused me of the idea of ever being a language major, because I got in this class where we had a brilliant professor, a guy by the name of Heinz Politzer, who was a famous analyst of German literature, a native German or Austrian. It was his first year at Berkeley, so every graduate student in the department wanted to take his class. And they were all native-born German-speakers. I think I was the only person who wasn't a native-born German speaker. He lectured in German, and it quickly became clear to me that I had no future in the field.

So, meanwhile, I'm cramming all these prerequisites for my zoology major. And basically, every year that I was at Berkeley, I liked my classes and my major better. I got through chemistry, I got through organic chemistry, I got through biochemistry, which I really liked. But I was doing well in all my classes, and so I basically kind of backed into being a zoology major, and I was one. But since I was clearly going to fail at the MRS degree, my idea of what I would do with a zoology major was go be a lab tech for someone somewhere. It never occurred to me—actually, I never even thought about graduate school. I don't even think the idea of it—it wasn't that I didn't think about it, it was that no thought of it ever entered my head. Even though I saw some women graduate students, there were no women on the faculty in zoology at Berkeley at that time, but there were women graduate students.

Every year, I liked the classes that I took, and I would look in the catalog and see, okay, so I took ZOO 1A, ZOO 1B, so what's next? So, my senior year, I'd had all these classes. I was still having to take almost all science at that point in order to complete my major, because I'd started as a sophomore.

Anyhow, so I wound up in this class. I had just a genius for picking the wrong right classes. Anyhow, I see this class that seemed to be the next one. It had a low undergraduate number, 108. It came after ZOO 8, something like that, which was Invertebrate Zoology, and this class was called Invertebrate Physiology. It seemed like the logical next thing for me to take.

It was by permission of the instructor. I go see the instructor, Ralph Smith, and he sits down. He's this little, wiry guy. He'd always wear a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and he had a necktie,

as the professors all dressed in those days. He had a necktie that he tucked into his shirt. So, he says to me, “Well, you know, Miss Kahan, this class is normally filled with graduate students, but if there is a place, then I will consider you for admission.” Didn’t ring any bells. I said, “Thank you very much.” Turned out there were eight graduate students in this class, two of us undergraduates. The other eight had all been the teaching assistants for the previous prerequisite course. [laughing] This still did not ring any bells with me. [laughing] Even though it was an undergraduate class—and it was basically designed kind of as an undergraduate class—unknown to me, it was the class where all the graduate students learned how to write their thesis, basically.

So, the deal was, in this class—this was for four credits, mind you—there regular two lectures and a midterm and a final and all that, but the real meat of the class was you had lab on Friday and Saturday. They were divided up into two-week sections, so the first Friday and Saturday, you got your assignment. There was no choice; you didn’t get to pick your project. You did what you were told. You got your project. You worked on it. Okay, here’s your animals, here’s the question, and here’s what you can do to find out about it.

I go to the lab, I get my assignment, which was to study filter feeding in mussels. I go in there, I get a mussel out of the tank, put it in the wax tray. I cut it open, I see the gills, I drop some carmine powder on it. I watch them for a while, I make a few notes, and I closed my book. I’m done! [laughter] I’m headed out the door, when in comes Dr. Smith. He says, “Well, Miss Kahan, I suppose you’ve seen”—and he talked about six things that I hadn’t seen, and back to the lab.

So, this class, with the eight graduate students and the two undergraduate students, the deal was the graduate students all knew that it was the only class they could take for four credits, but it was their full-time thing. I, on the other hand, was taking 12 credits, all science, and I think Jack, the other undergraduate, probably was, too. So, the graduate students spent the entire week, between the first Friday and Saturday and the next Friday and Saturday, working on their project. The second Saturday, they had a class symposium, where you had to give a demonstration with a report on what you had done, and what you had found. And the following Tuesday, you would have like a 10-page scientific paper, fully referenced, typed, with a carbon paper, in duplicate, due Tuesday morning at the 8:00am lecture. [laughing] It was a very rude awakening.

Fiksdal: Wow. But you stayed in the class.

Kahan: I stayed in the class. I learned how to write a scientific paper, pronto. Ralph Smith, the deal was, so you had the top copy and the carbon copy—carbon paper—and he kept one of the copies. He corrected one, and kept the other, the uncorrected one. And every student paper that had ever been

written for this class was in notebooks in the special little biology library, to which privileged undergraduates like myself got permission to use. So, you could look up and see what every student previous to you had done on this project. And you were allowed to quote them in your footnotes and so forth. Anyhow, so I learned how to write a scientific paper, and that stood me in really good stead when I went to write my thesis.

Well, I'm still an undergraduate this point. So, I'm going along, I'm taking this class, and Ralph Smith and Cadet Hand, the professor that had taught the previous class, decided that anybody, any undergraduate, foolish enough to take this 108 class must be good enough to go to graduate school. So, they nominated Jack and I for Woodrow Wilson Fellowships.

Okay. Well, I hadn't even thought about graduate school—I mean, even though I saw graduate students every day in class, you know. But, competitive person that I am, I realized that in order to get this fellowship, I would actually have to apply to a graduate school somewhere. So, I did. I had to get some references, so I went around. And I had done well in my biochemistry class, and I really liked biochemistry, and at that point, I was sort of thinking I would be a cell biologist.

So, I go to the biochemistry professor, who was a Harvard product, and he said, "Well, of course, Harvard is the best school in the country." He said, "You can go there." But, at the same time, telling me that the biochemistry department at Berkeley, which had been where I was thinking of, did not admit women to graduate studies.

Fiksdal: Oh, my gosh! I didn't know that was possible.

Kahan: Could you believe that anybody—

Fiksdal: No.

Kahan: I was told right to my face. "Sorry, the graduate department of biochemistry at Berkeley does not admit women students." I would have to apply to Harvard.

Okay. So, I applied four places, thinking that—and by that time, I sort of changed over to wanting to do some invertebrate physiology. I was liking this class, so basically, Harvard was out, because they didn't have a very good program in that.

Anyhow, so I applied to four places, thinking, okay, I can always go back to Berkeley. They will take me as a graduate student. And I applied to the University of Washington, where I would have been working with Dixie Lee Ray. [chuckles]

Fiksdal: You could have been famous.

Kahan: But I was warned off coming up here, because she was apparently quite anti-woman.

Fiksdal: Huh.

Kahan: So, she had a very bad reputation among the graduate students. Berkeley, Stanford and Harvard, and—I applied to four places—Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, some other place I don't remember—anyhow, thinking the choice would be made for me. But—oh, the University of Washington, that was the fourth one, of course. Unfortunately, I got into all of them. [laughter]

So, then I had to make a decision. So, the University of Washington was out, because I listened to what people told me. Harvard was out because it didn't have a good program. Berkeley wasn't a good choice, as they make you go away for a year, anyhow, so you didn't, you know, just become a little parrot for the department, and you'd get some other experience and stuff. So, basically, that kind of left Stanford.

But at that point, my mother gets busy, and she says, "You should go to Harvard. You know. It's a school where there's all men." Right? [laughing] "I'm sure you'll love it there, dear." "I'm not going there because it doesn't have a good invertebrate program." "No, I think—I'll fly you back there. You can go see the campus. You're going to love it." Blah blah. "I'm not going." And she kept at it, and so finally, I said, "All right. I'll go somewhere for an interview. I'm going to Stanford."

I get on the bus and go over to Stanford. I make no appointments or anything. I just show up. I ask where the biology department is. They point me in the right direction. I get over there, and I run into this young professor, and I say, "Can you point me to Dr. Kennedy's office?" And he says, "Well, I'm Dr. Kennedy. I'll take you over there." He takes me in his office. He shows me around, where he's got these seawater tanks. He introduces me to his graduate students. Says he—oh, he pulls out a stack of reprints, hands those to me. Says, you know, "I would be happy to have you in my lab." I think he had talked to Don Wilson, the guy that was teaching invertebrate neurophysiology at Berkeley, so he actually knew who I was, which amazed me. So, of course, I went there. And that's how I got into graduate school. [laughing]

Fiksdal: That's a great story. I didn't even know that you went to Harvard.

Kahan: I did not go to Harvard. I refused to go to Harvard. [laughing] I only went to Stanford to say to my mom that I went to interview somewhere! [laughing]

Fiksdal: Oh, I see. Okay. [laughter]

Kahan: It's like, okay, I'm doing the shortest possible thing. Just get off my back! That's how I got to graduate school. So.

Fiksdal: And at that time, you were in zoology still?

Kahan: Well, at Berkeley, I majored in zoology. Stanford did not have a zoology department, they had a biology department. So, I had to take some botany as part of their Ph.D. program.

Fiksdal: So, how many women were studying with you in your year? Do you remember?

Kahan: Well, I had a very good choice of major professor, Don Kennedy. He really liked having women in his lab doing stuff, so there were three, out of maybe half a dozen graduate students that were graduate students, half of us were women. And one gal went on to be a professor of anesthesiology at the Stanford Medical School. The other one went to . . . what is the New England college? Is it Mount Holyoke? What's the other? Maybe it's Mount Holyoke. Anyhow, she went on to be a dean—first, a professor there, and then a dean. And then, there was me. We all got professional jobs.

So, he liked it. So, that was one plus was he, unlike Paul Ehrlich, who told Pat Labine that normally, he didn't take women students, but in her case, he would make an exception. This was still the '60s. But Don really liked having women around.

Okay, the other thing about him was he prided himself on being a really good teacher of undergraduates. He was not one of these people who think that what he's doing with his graduate students is turning them into little clones, research clones, of himself, and who were going to go on to a research career. Both Margie Linderson and Joan Kendig went on to do a lot—basically, had research careers. But more of the guys kind of took that path.

But anyhow, he knew I was interested in teaching undergraduates. And, dumb as I was, I actually said this at one time, so he knew, which would have been instant death, I think, in a lot of people's labs. You would have been out of there. He thought that was a good idea, so when time came for me to get a job, he comes in with a letter and he says, "I think I found a job for you," which was teaching at Antioch College.

Fiksdal: So, he basically handed you your first opportunity.

Kahan: Absolutely. The one and only. The one and only. I did not apply—

Fiksdal: Didn't look around.

Kahan: I did not look around. I thought teaching at Antioch would be a good thing. I went out to Yellow Springs, Ohio—I was interviewed. They accepted my application. I went out there, was interviewed and was hired. So, yeah.

Fiksdal: That's just amazing. Now, how long did you teach at Antioch?

Kahan: Three years.

Fiksdal: Oh, three years.

Kahan: Yeah.

Fiksdal: So, before you got to Antioch, and you were back at Stanford doing your program, did you have any female professors?

Kahan: I don't think so. I don't think there—there was a woman geologist at Stanford, but I don't think there were any women in the biology department. I can't think of any. Well, there were no women in the pipeline, basically. There were two graduates—other than those of us in Don's lab—well, Pat Labine was working with Paul Ehrlich, and Merideth Gold, who worked with Cliff Grobstein, they were exceptions [chuckles]

Kahan: There was a woman who was working with Cliff Grobstein, who was—he was an embryologist, an extremely well-known embryologist.

Fiksdal: So, you didn't have anyone you could model yourself after, as a female anyway, when you went off to teach.

Kahan: Yeah.

Fiksdal: But how did, I mean, how did you teach? Did you just . . .

Kahan: I just did what I do. You know?

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: Actually, it never . . . it never sort of was a big concern. I was—I always thought if I did well at academics, you know, then there would be a path. And it didn't occur to me whether there were—you know, I had some intimations, like being told that the biochemistry department at Berkeley wouldn't accept women. And my dad, who's an engineer, had, at one point, said a lot of, you can imagine, things about women engineers. And so I was exposed to anti-feminist sort of stuff, but . . . but it didn't come up as an issue, really.

On the other hand, you know, I was very lucky, because I born was just at the right time—so, when I was—I was in junior high school when Sputnik went up. And it took a while for the U.S. government to get geared up, but they did. And they threw a lot of money at science students. So, that was in 1959, that was Sputnik. No, that was in 1956, yeah, '56 or '57. Okay, so government threw all this money at academics. That was how the high-school-into-college program benefited from that.

There were science scholarships. I had a National Science Foundation Fellowship at Stanford. Once again, you know, we're out there beating the Russians. We're going to put a lot of money into graduate studies in science, so, you know, it was right at the right time. By the time I finished graduate school in 1967, the feminist wave had reared its, you know, its big crest was just up there. And every science department in every university was looking to hire women. You know? So it was, it had nothing to do with me, but I benefited from every single bit of that.

Fiksdal: Yeah. So, I'm interested in how you made the decision that you wanted to teach undergraduates. Did you teach as a TA, or . . .?

Kahan: Yes, I taught as a TA. But I knew that before I wanted to go to graduate school—because my horizons were very limited. I mean, I never thought about a research career—which is a good thing, because I would have been lousy at it. But it seemed like teaching was a thing to do. And I definitely did not want to be teaching junior high school students, or high school students and stuff, so teaching undergraduates was kind of like the next reasonable thing.

And I did have some very good luck with teaching. There was a—at Stanford—that must have been the last year I was there—Stanford was experimenting with some different programs for undergraduates. And one of the things they did was they had an introductory biology class that was taught by all the senior professors in the department. And then, they had sections that were taught by graduate students.

And Don said, “Here, this looks good for you. You can do this.” [laughing] And so I got one of these really, not prestigious, but hard-to-get teaching assistantships. So, I actually taught my own little section. But teaching at Antioch was really my first real job.

Fiksdal: And I assume at Antioch, it wasn’t huge, so you must have taught under-, lower-class students and upper-class students as well?

Kahan: Yeah, they had breadth requirements in science, and the introductory biology was one of the ones that people who didn’t want to do science took. So, that was my first, that was my first assignment there. I can’t remember if I ever taught general biology. I don’t think I did. But my first class that I taught was evolutionary biology. And that was the class that people who didn’t want to study science took. [chuckles]

Fiksdal: So, you taught that three years. Was there anything going on there, or in your own teaching trajectory, that wanted you to leave? Or, pushed you to leave?

Kahan: Well, all right. So, I think I told you about this. But, all right. So, I’d been there, I think it was my second year. I applied for a research grant for teachers at undergraduate colleges. They wanted to get—the National Science Foundation wanted you to get into doing research. I had a grant, bought a lot of equipment, and I set up a lab. And was set out on one of the stupidest projects any biologist could possibly ever—this is why I’m not, would not be good at research. So, I wanted to study some stuff about cicadas. You’re heard of 17-year cicadas, haven’t you?

Fiksdal: Oh, yeah, I have, actually.

Kahan: Okay? So, it is not a good choice, not a good choice, to pick an animal that only appears once every 17 years! [laughter]

Fiksdal: They’re not all like that, are they?

Kahan: No. Actually, there are several, but they come out at different places in the country. So, if you wanted to study them, I mean, you'd have to go off one place one year, and then another place another year, because they're only out for a month! [laughing] It's like anybody, any biologist, with any brains at all would know this is totally crazy, but that was what I was interested in.

Anyhow, so I got my lab set up, and the technique we were using in those days was you had glass pipettes with tiny, tiny, tiny tips that you can actually poke right through the cell membrane of an individual cell, and you can record the electrical events that are happening in that cell. It was a very well-known technique and stuff. So, I had a machine that you can use to make these pipettes—you had to make your own electrodes.

So, I had a machine that was supposed to do that, and I could not get it to work. And so I knew that there was a—it was a Japanese machine, and I knew there was a Japanese neurophysiologist who was working in St. Louis. So, I called him up, and asked if I could come and he could show me how to use this machine. And I was set to go—I bought myself and the machine a plane ticket. Turned out the machine had to have its own plane ticket. Got to fly in the passenger compartment. [laughter] So, it had an electrical box, like so, and a big thing with metal posts and parts and electrical stuff in there that weighed about 70 pounds.

Anyhow, I was ready to take my machine to St. Louis to figure out how to use it. This was '69, probably, '68 or '69. And, of course, it was a time of great upheaval in the country, and the Antioch students were right out in front of everybody, you know. They'd already had quite a lot of student strikes and things like that. So, they had another student strike, and they padlocked all the buildings, including the one my machine was in, and they were not going to let me get the machine and leave town.

I was ready to call the police, I was ready to call the college president. I was really upset. And finally, I was able to persuade the group guarding the lab door that I was not going to run in there and lock myself in the lab and not come out. [laughter] And I actually thought their cause for their strike was reasonable. I just wanted to get my machine and leave town. And finally, they decided to let me do this, but they sent down this very large undergraduate guy to guard me, so that I wouldn't run in there and lock myself in, or run off. I don't know. Anyhow, he let me carry this heavy machine up the stairs, all by myself, while he stood guard. [laughing]

By the time I got on the plane, I was steamed. I was really mad. So, what I did on the plane on the way to St. Louis was I read the want ads in Science, and I saw the ad that they were advertising for Evergreen. So, I read that. And I was wondering whether I could get a job anywhere, because, having

taught at an undergraduate college, it's not your ticket to go to a major university. Sorry, you know, it just doesn't happen. Probably still.

Anyhow, so I saw this ad, and I thought, well . . . I don't, you know, Antioch was just too crazy. I was thinking let's see if I can get a job anywhere else. Well, here was a place that was advertising for someone, so I sent off the first of my crazy letters.

I wrote this letter, and I said, "Well, I'm here at Antioch College, and I've been teaching some different things, and among them—you say you want to have interdisciplinary education. Well, I have actually had some experience there. I taught a class with a physicist on the eye and vision, so I have actually done some of this. And what can I do for Evergreen? Well, I think it's going to be a lot harder than you think to pull this off." [laughter] "So, I can help you avoid mistakes, and by the way, I don't really know whether I want to leave Antioch or not. When things are good, they're good. But who knows what will happen in the future? And, by the way, it isn't too convenient for me to come when you're advertising the job for." [laughter] "You can just drop my letter in your files, and sometime, if you're hiring again, I might be interested." [laughter]

Fiksdal: You really knew how to talk, didn't you?

Kahan: Well, I tried this twice, and it's worked every time, so what can I say? So, probably mine was the only letter they got that said, "I see what you're doing." [laughing] "I have my doubts that it will work, and it's not too convenient for me to come when you want someone." [laughter]

Fiksdal: I'm sure it was, yeah.

Kahan: So, that was probably the only application letter that said that.

Fiksdal: And it stood out.

Kahan: Yeah, fortunately! [laughter] So, I got invited out for an interview. I had met Ed Kormondy at a conference in Washington, D.C. and I think he might have had something to do with that also.

Fiksdal: He was quite well known, wasn't he?

Kahan: Yes. Yeah. So, I got an interview, and I got hired. So, that's how I came to Evergreen.

Fiksdal: Yeah, that's great. And so that was the first year that the college was opened?

Kahan: First year there were students.

Fiksdal: And, if I understand correctly, the way that operated was that the planning faculty all had chosen things they wanted to do, and then they hired—

Kahan: They had designed programs.

Fiksdal: Right. So, which one was yours?

Kahan: I was in Causality, Freedom and Chance. And how that fits in with regard to decision-making, how does your brain work for decision-making? Are you actually in charge of your decisions, or is your brain sort of autonomously ticking away in the background, and the decision is actually made before you think you've consciously made it? Or, whatever. So, that was my part. Then I taught invertebrate neurophysiology [laughing] in that class, sort of how the neurons work. You know, physiology basics.

Fiksdal: And who was the planning faculty that you taught with?

Kahan: Will Humphreys.

Fiksdal: Oh, yeah.

Kahan: Okay, so he was the coordinator. Fred Young, who was the only Evergreen professor that ever had tenure.

Fiksdal: At Evergreen?

Kahan: At Evergreen. That was a condition of his coming. Greg Stuewe-Portnoff—who was only Greg Portnoff at that time—and Willie Parson, and me.

Fiksdal: So, I remember all those people, and I respect them. How did that work out? You had a lot of people to coordinate with.

Kahan: Yes. It was a five-person team, 100 students. The college wasn't really open when we started. We camped out at Fox Island for a while before we came to Olympia—and then, we met in the Senate Office Building downtown, before they actually had anything going. The lab building, I think, was not open that whole year. We were doing lab science in the Library. I think that's right. No, we must have eventually had labs, but it wasn't right away.

Yeah, it was a crazy year. Most of the people had had absolutely no experience with interdisciplinary teaching, and a lot of the people that were doing the original planning, they were not in the sciences. There were scientists, but how science would get integrated into this was kind of going to be a magic process, I think. Yeah.

And part of the problem is, on the whole, for science—most students come to college having learned, at least to some degree, the English language. They had the language in which they can read their books, and where ideas can be presented to them, and they can think about them and stuff like that. So, to a greater or lesser degree, they have the basic language that you need, so then you can begin to discuss issues in a subject. But in science, there is a language—it's math—and quite a lot of the students had been math avoiders. That's why they came to Evergreen. And so you have to start with math in some of your introductory material, I think, before you can begin to discuss issues in science. And that was a problem that was not thought through at all before that year.

So, we did have some math in that program, because Will Humphreys was teaching stuff about probability, and Fred Young was a mathematician. So, there was some math in the program, but that part was not very well thought through.

The people from the humanities had their way of doing seminars, okay, where they got together and, in the English language, they discussed these problems, and you could bring in different points of view. In science, you didn't have that. You had problem sets, you might have problems that you could talk about within biology by using English, but the science seminars that I'd had, had been one graduate student lecturing to a bunch of other graduate students. Or, there was the department seminar, where a famous person who's doing interesting research came and talked to a whole bunch of graduate students and the faculty.

And so, I think, certainly for me, the whole idea of seminars was a big puzzle. And it wasn't actually till, I think, I taught with you several years later that I got to a better place about doing seminars. But I was in a number of science programs where we had seminars, and they were always duds. They were terrible. [laughing]

Fiksdal: So, you still had the seminar?

Kahan: Well, we had classes called seminars, yes.

Fiksdal: Okay.

Kahan: But . . . there wasn't . . . later, I got to the point where we used seminar time in a different way. The faculty would get together in their faculty seminar, and they would say, "What do we want the students to discuss?" And we would pose some questions, and then we'd have these little—break up the larger group into smaller groups, and they would have the task of working on these questions, and reporting back to the rest of the class what the outcomes of their discussion were, which worked quite well. There was a structure there. You know?

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: There was a purpose, and outcome that was expected, and ideas to be covered. In the beginning, we'd get together in this room, and it was like, "Well, what did you think of the book?" You know? That was terrible.

Fiksdal: Yeah. Well, yeah, and especially since a large number of the faculty didn't have training in humanities, where a seminar is, you know, most like what people expected it to be, I guess, across the curriculum, where you talk about sort of big ideas. Sometimes you have to talk about much smaller ones, of course, to get to the big idea. But anyway, you're talking about ideas.

Kahan: Yeah. But when your students are at the level of, What are the contents of a sentence?
[laughing] Subject, verb object—it's very difficult to have a meaningful conversation—I mean, as a linguist, you would want to say, well, there are other languages that have a different order, and things like that—you might get into Chomsky and that sort of thing—but if your students are basically doing elementary stuff, it's very difficult to get them to have good seminars.

And, toward the end of my career at Evergreen, I taught a lot of more advanced classes, where we could—where the students knew enough, you know. The thing about undertaking interdisciplinary studies, the question that wasn't asked, or the approach that wasn't taken—was in order to have an interdisciplinary discussion, you must have people who have some sense of a discipline in order to share interdisciplinary, you know, to share stuff in an interdisciplinary way. It's not just blathering.

Your discipline gives you the approach in which to ask certain questions. And if you go interdisciplinary, then you can share those approaches. You know, in sociology, we would look at it this way, or this would be the question we would ask about language. You know? The neurobiologist wants to know where it is in the brain. Another neurobiologist, or a philosopher, wants to know whether there's a universal language, and is it in the brain? And that sort of thing. But they come to ask those questions through their discipline. And, of course, we faculty probably could have had some pretty good interdisciplinary discussions of such questions, but the students clearly were not really in a position to do that. And I think that problem plagued us very severely in the beginning, and then gradually, stuff started to shake out, and especially in the sciences, the laying of the foundations, the laying of the foundations was put into the curriculum.

Fiksdal: Literally, the foundations of natural science?

Kahan: Absolutely—so, physics, chemistry, math—before students could get to more interesting questions, at least in the scientific inquiry affinity group.

Fiksdal: So, early on, I'm just assuming that you taught a lot of different programs with a lot of—there was five-person programs, and it was hard, and you slugged through, but did you—do you remember many students getting kind of interested in science as a result, and wanting to do more? Or, do you think that acted against their wanting to do more, because you couldn't get into the depth?

Kahan: It's kind of hard to say. I don't . . . I only kind of know about a couple of students from that class. My impression, based on absolutely nothing but personal anecdotal stuff, was students would find a faculty member they liked, and then they would major in that faculty member. And so, it was more of personal, it was a personal modeling thing, rather than a subject matter attraction, certainly, I

don't think anybody probably got turned on to science in that class, for sure. I did have—okay, so moving on.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: All right, so after that—all right, so in the second year of the college, you know, when we came to interview before the college was opened, one of the questions they asked was, “Well, if you could teach an interdisciplinary—could have an interdisciplinary class, and do anything you wanted, what would the class be that you wanted to do?” And I said, “Oh, well, I would have a class that involved invertebrate zoology and paleontology and, I don't know, botany and geology. And we would call it Life on Earth, and in the middle of the year, the students would take a raft trip down the Colorado River, and study geology and paleontology and botany,” and related subjects. And then, they bought the idea, and in the second year, that's what we did.

Fiksdal: Oh, already, in the second year?

Kahan: Yeah. Yeah, in the second year.

Fiksdal: And so who—do you remember who you taught with that second year?

Kahan: Yes. Pete Taylor, and Chet Royce, who did not last long at the college. It was actually, although it was a pretty successful—it was a very successful class in its own way. I'm proud of that class. But it was one of the hardest classes, one of the hardest years I've had at Evergreen.

You know, the college was still being formed, and so we had this idea that there would be a student contract that the students would sign. It would be a program contract. Students would have these responsibilities and stuff, and the faculty would do this, and that and the other. Well, they would have to commit to that. And we have a big program uprising. “No, I'm not signing anything. I don't even sign checks!”

Fiksdal: Oh, my goodness.

Kahan: Famous thing said by one of our students. Okay. So, Chet—we can speak freely about him, because he is no longer on this planet—Chet and I, there was no issue too small for the two of us to butt heads about.

Fiksdal: Oh, geez.

Kahan: So, it was one, long year of fighting. And our third faculty member, Pete, did not like conflict. So basically, [laughter] as Chet and I were fighting, Pete would just duck. But whatever it was that we, Chet and I, managed to hammer out as a compromise solution, six weeks later, Pete would say he didn't like it.

Fiksdal: Oh, my gosh! [laughing]

Kahan: It was an awful year. It was really a horrible year. But, we did, we had this river trip. And a couple years ago—maybe like five years ago now, it's been a while—we had the 40th anniversary reunion river trip, and a dozen students and I did a raft trip down the Colorado, with one of the students from that program, [who] went on to be a river guide, and own a river company. And so he and his wife, who was also my student during that year—and I remembered all but one of the students that came on this. They were really good students. They all wound up having some kind of scientific-related career, and they all said that this class was very important in the way their lives turned out and stuff like that. It was just great.

And the only student that I couldn't remember—I mean, all these students were quite good students, although their paths—you know, you had one who had a river company, one who was a computer consultant, one who went on to have his own ecological research company, one who is an entomologist, but who is currently growing peonies for export in Alaska. [laughter] Only at Evergreen.

Fiksdal: Yes.

Kahan: And then there was this other student, and he was—I couldn't remember him. I remembered all the others—I didn't recognize any of them, because, after all, it was 40 years later. They were older now. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Yes.

Kahan: In the middle of this reunion trip, he came up to me and he said, "You know, in that class, I spent all my time avoiding you." [laughter] "But, it was a very meaningful class."

You know, the design was basically mine. Anyhow, it was a really horrible year. And I just . . . it's a wonder I survived it. It was just awful.

Fiksdal: How did it happen that there were only three of you, when you're supposed to teach with five?

Kahan: No, you weren't supposed to teach with five.

Fiksdal: Oh.

Kahan: Your program design was you could submit for less than that. And there were actually a lot of three-faculty programs that came after that first year. It was pretty obvious that 100 students was an awful lot to manage. And, if you're doing lab science, there is a limited amount of lab space and equipment. So, programs, it was more about what your idea was, and who you needed to complete the idea, than absolutely sticking to 100 people. And I don't think there were—after that, mostly I think the programs went down to four, four faculty and 80 students. There were very few 100-student programs. There might have been also that you couldn't recruit 100 students to do any particular thing. I don't know. Yeah.

Fiksdal: So, in that program that you designed, you needed this kind of person, that kind of person, the other kind of person. So, that's one way to design a program. But you had such a hard year, I'm wondering if you chose a different way to organize how you taught after that.

Kahan: It was a personality issue. It was just Chet . . . oh, I can't say enough bad things about him. He badmouthed me to students behind my back. He badmouthed me to other faculty members down at Spud and Elma's, when they used to go down there for a beer on Friday afternoons. And he'd come and complain about what a bad person I was. Fortunately, my friends, who were down there drinking beer, also reported all this stuff to me.

He was . . . he curried favor with the students, but if you disagreed with him as a student, then you got on his shit list, and there were—I had one student, who I really wish had come on the river reunion trip that didn't come, who is now a biochemist, who's this very, very bright guy, but definitely an individual thinker, you know, an imaginative person, had ideas. We required students to write journals, and he kept a journal. We said, "You should write a page a day." So, I get this journal from him, and he's got like a five-page story, and the story says "January 29, January 30, January 31, January 32, January 33." [laughter]

But also, you know, it's like—and one day, he showed up with glittered tennis shoes, and it just threw Chet for a loop. He was this ultra-macho guy, and he just could not compute on glittered tennis shoes. You know, he just went off in a little tailspin. So, it was, you know, stuff like that. And he—we hired him. I mean, I actually was responsible for getting him hired, I think. Because I looked at all the resumes of the geologists—we had no geologist at the time, so we hired a geologist. He had been an undergraduate here in Washington State. He got his Ph.D. at the University of Arizona, or somewhere in Arizona, so he knew all the geology of both places, which was perfect.

Fiksdal: Yeah, yeah.

Kahan: And he was a very good geologist, and an enthusiastic geologist. Anyhow, so we hired him, but we missed quite a lot of the . . . things that were just sort of tossed off in his resumes that were like . . . he'd got into some kind of fight with . . . he threatened somebody, somebody threatened him, and there was some altercation. That was mentioned, you know, sort of as a sideline in the resume. So, he had kind of a history of . . . unpleasant or antisocial behavior before he came here. And he . . . I found out from the students that he had gotten into a big bar fight down here somewhere, and a bunch of the students [chuckles] went and ganged up on him and beat him up. And, you know, so he was not behaving in the normal—much of this occurred outside, you know, I didn't know. I knew about the

badmouthing, but I didn't know about any of this other stuff. So anyhow, so there was this fight between him and students who were out drinking together. Yeah.

And then, he got himself fired, and he got himself fired because at that time, the evaluation system was you would sit down with a student, and you would have your draft evaluation of them, and they would have an evaluation of you, and you would exchange evaluations, and discuss them. Well, so he had this student—the students kind of caught on to his erratic behavior, as the program went on. And so, pretty soon, quite a number of them were alienated.

So, he has an evaluation conference with this student, and she had written him a bad evaluation. Okay? And the evaluation he wrote of her, she was a good student, it was a good evaluation. Well, when the transcript version was turned in, he had changed it, and it was a bad evaluation. And she was—she had been—Ed Kormondy, who was Provost at the time—she had been his student, and so she went to Ed and told him this story. And that was the end of him off the faculty.

Fiksdal: Wow.

Kahan: It was completely unprofessional behavior.

Fiksdal: Oh, yeah.

Kahan: And, you know, to put something like that in a student's transcript that was going to follow them around for the next 25 years, is unforgivable.

Fiksdal: At a slight, yeah.

Kahan: So, that was—

Fiksdal: So, he was there just the one year?

Kahan: He was there about a year and a half. He was in a different—he had been teaching in a different program at the time this all came around. But Ed showed him the door.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: Yeah.

Fiksdal: So, when you think back at all these years of teaching, do you remember any programs that you were just—you were proud of the one, but you had—it was a tough year. Were you proud of others that you really—did you thrive in them in different ways? Were you—do you have a fond memory of some of these?

Kahan: I have a fond memory of that one. Or, not, well, some of the outcomes of that one. But maybe the following—no, the following year, I taught in a program with Phil Harding and Stan Klein. I think it was the three of us. It was about design. And then, following that, I taught with Peggy Dickinson, a two-person program. They're getting smaller. [laughter] It's fewer and fewer people I could get along with.

Peggy Dickinson and I had a two-quarter program called Forms in Art and Biology. And Peggy was just a fabulous person to teach with. She was a wonderful teacher. She had good ideas about stuff that we could do. We did half-science and half-art. So, the students had four art projects, one every five weeks, in tandem with a different subject that we were doing. We did some developmental biology. We did some stuff about form and function. Yeah. I don't remember all the things we read. Peggy had some anthropological interests, you know, stuff about form and function. I think the previous program was called Form and Function, and then Peggy and I did Forms in Art and Biology. Yeah. So, that was great.

Peggy and I got along very well together. We shared ideas. She was interested in the science, I was interested in the art stuff. I learned a lot about some art things. I had never taken any art history, and we did some readings about minimalist art, there were readings about biomorphic art, and minimalist art, and things like that, that I had no idea about previous to that class. So, that was a very good experience.

And what was very interesting in that class was the best students were all the art students. The science—the art students could do the science, but the science students could not do the art. And so it turned out they had lousy, unimaginative projects, and the art students really got off on the biology. [laughing] It was . . .

Fiksdal: It was interesting.

Kahan: Yeah, it was pretty strange.

Fiksdal: But they knew, coming in, that they'd be doing both.

Kahan: Yes, but, as with everything else, you don't know what it is till it is.

Fiksdal: No, that's right.

Kahan: So it turned out, science students just have a terrible time doing art. [laughing] Or, at least the kinds of art we did.

Fiksdal: That sounds like a great class. Would you like to take a little break?

End Part 1 of 2 of Linda Kahan on 9-21-17

Begin Part 2 of 2 of Linda Kahan on 9-21-17

Fiksdal: Okay, we're back with Linda Kahan, and the second part of the interview. And I was wondering, Linda, how you thought about working and learning with different colleagues over the time of your career? How did that go, and how did you learn to work with people?

Kahan: Well, I don't know. I guess, if you pick—you have to be careful—I think the big lesson is you have to get compatible colleagues. They have to appreciate your area. I think, if your colleague doesn't think

much of your field, you're bound to have difficulties. [laughing] And I've been blessed. I've had some excellent colleagues. I loved teaching with David, and—

Fiksdal: David Milne?

Kahan: No . . . Paulsen. David Paulsen. I liked teaching with Dave Milne, too. We had a program called Biology in the 21st Century, which was Bill Ransom, me, and another biologist. Each time, the biologist rotated in and out of the program, and we had some excellent colleagues. And it was a really good, really good program. So, that was good. Peggy Dickinson was a great colleague.

Kahan: Right. But we got along very well, and I think there was a respect for our different disciplines, and for how things went. We had a good collegial relationship the year we taught together. And I think that program was quite successful—I think a good faculty team makes for a good program. It's not the subject matter, or any of those things. It's how well the faculty team work together.

Fiksdal: That's a very nice point. Yeah, I think it's especially true, or you sort of realize that more and more if you have a problem with someone in your team. And we were lucky, because our team was fairly large. I mean, they added—remember?

Kahan: Valerie.

Fiksdal: Yeah, this colleague from a community college.

Kahan: Yes.

Fiksdal: So, there were a number of us, and that helped a lot with dealing with a difficult person.

Kahan: Yeah, that's true. And the three—especially in like the three-person team I talked about before, it was . . . well, first of all, because that person badmouthed me outside of class. That, of course, leaked right out to the students, and they—the students took sides. You know?

Fiksdal: Oh, no.

Kahan: We're back to this. It was only one program, and it was in the second year of the college. But there were kind of a lot of lessons there.

So, here's another example of the kind of bad behavior that went on. This person had a lot of problems with authority figures and women. And I was the coordinator, which isn't exactly an authority figure, but it put us in an antagonistic sort of thing. And what he would do was, whenever anything came up, he would say to the students, "Well, I'd really like to help you with this problem you're having and stuff, but, you know, the faculty agreed to operate by consensus, and she will never accept this."

[laughing]

Fiksdal: Oh, my gosh!

Kahan: So that was a kind of, you know, that does not make for a happy program. And . . . yeah. Okay, so but on pretty much every other team I've had, that sort of an issue was never a problem . . . I was on one other team where there was a lot of problems with the—between—within the faculty. Basically, the problems had to do with lack of respect between faculty members, and that program kind of semi-destructed in the third quarter.

Fiksdal: Oh. And so then, did you each just have a group of students that you worked with?

Kahan: No. It was a very large group anyhow. We had . . . I'm not going to name names, but we had a new faculty member who was the source of quite a bit of the problem. So, it was his first year teaching at the college. We had a faculty member who had had a lot of problems in his previous program, so he was sort of on probation, and his main concern was putting himself in a position where he couldn't be criticized. And the two of them were supposed to work together. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Oh, gosh.

Kahan: Which created a lot of tension within the program. And there was also some of this badmouthing. The new faculty member was talking to students and saying about this guy that was very defensive and, you know, concerned about his own career at the college. "You shouldn't have to put up with the way he teaches," and all this kind of stuff.

And so, that sort of thing was going on, so that was very bad. So, you know, and that has to do with personal respect. And it's a very hard thing with these, with groups, I think it's, you know, as much as anything, the hardest thing about trying to do interdisciplinary studies, you know, set up interdisciplinary programs. And sometimes the deans, you know, in that case, the deans had pushed on us this faculty member who was in this sort of probationary status, and so he didn't think anybody was going to be on his side in this team.

There was a larger team than that. So we had a physicist, a mathematician . . . several different chemists at one time or another. And it was kind of like physics, chemistry and math. And then, there was me, [laughter] who didn't really belong in the program, but somehow got assigned to it, and became the coordinator. So, it wasn't . . . it was an attempt to provide that layer of science preparation, so students could go on to do other things. And although there can be—with a lot of discussion, there probably can be a good, coordinated approach to these things, where the physics and the chemistry work together, and the physics and the math work together, and stuff like that. But when the physicist and the mathematicians aren't speaking to each other, and they have very different ideas about how things should be done, that issue took up the large amount of airtime in faculty discussions, and everything else. So, all other issues basically got pushed to the side around this conflict.

Fiksdal: Because you talked about that so much.

Kahan: Well, or it was talked or not talked, and, yeah, it was . . .

Fiksdal: Remember, in our program, we had difficulty in a faculty seminar, because one person didn't seem to respect anyone else's point of view, and, which is really strange.

Kahan: [Laughing] Yes.

Fiksdal: And I don't think we ever figured that out exactly, but I remember that we agreed to have 20 minutes for whoever had chosen the book of the week for seminar. And that first 20 minutes would be dedicated to that person to both explain a little bit about the book, and why it fit the program so well, and how we might be able to use it in seminar, before we actually started trying to have a seminar on the book ourselves. And that worked really well. Did you have any other kinds of situations like that, where you had to—well, for us, it was the seminar that really mattered. I don't know if you had that many faculty seminars in your career, because you were doing so much science.

Kahan: Well, but we actually did. There were lots of things to talk about. It wasn't always like a book seminar, you know, but we did talk about how to make the class go. You know? So we weren't—they didn't—see, I think that's kind of like went to the original idea about having a seminar was you'll have a book, and everybody will discuss it in an interdisciplinary fashion. But, in science, first of all, there are hardly books. One year we tried to get around that by assigning, having the students . . . I think they had to subscribe to *Science* magazine, and we read a science article every week, and we tried to discuss that. It was hard, because, of course, the science in there was pretty advanced. So, that's how we got around that.

Fiksdal: But that seems like a really good idea.

Kahan: Well . . .

Fiksdal: Because you could—I mean, part of the time, of course, you'd have to give some background so the students would—

Kahan: Right. We did read books, because we read about fraud in science, and we read about . . . what else? I don't remember what the other books were in that year. Anyhow, but we did read, we read some books, and tried to discuss them. We didn't have seminars every week in that class.

Fiksdal: No.

Kahan: So, because the students were very busy doing their science homework. [laughter]

Fiksdal: Yes, and they needed the time.

Kahan: They had problem sets and things.

Fiksdal: So, did you ever get to teach with friends?

Kahan: Well, Peggy Dickinson. And, you know, after a class, we—I consider myself to be friends with David Paulsen, friends with you. Yeah. I taught with Kaye V. Ladd and Rob Knapp. And, yeah. So, if you're not necessarily friends in the beginning, you might become friends as a result. Or, enemies.
[laughter]

Fiksdal: That's true. It's a very tight relationship.

Kahan: Yeah, I just had a fleeting thought in there. Now, I don't . . . I don't remember what . . .

Fiksdal: About teaching with friends, or . . . ?

Kahan: That was what got me started, but . . .

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: . . . but I don't remember what it was at the moment. It might come back to me.

Fiksdal: So, another question we have here is—you talked about this a little bit when you talked about your program with Peggy Dickinson—were there programs where you learned new things, and really got interested in those new things? I mean, because of different disciplines.

Kahan: Yeah. Certainly, teaching with Peggy, I learned a lot about art. In the previous program, the one I taught with Phil Harding and Lee Anderson and Stan Klein, Phil did a thing about where we had a drawing class for the students, and so I learned some drawing techniques. I don't know whether they're still there, but at one time, there were a series of drawings from student notebooks that were up in the halls in Lab 1.

Fiksdal: That came from there?

Kahan: That came from that class.

Kahan: And Phil, it was a result of Phil's—part of it, at least, was from Phil's drawing class. Teaching with David Paulsen, I learned all kinds of things. I never, I assiduously avoided picking any philosophy classes when I was an undergraduate, so David was teaching Philosophy of Science. I got very interested in that. Yeah. So, I would say, in lots of the classes—and, you know, you read different books that you might or might not have read. One year, when I took, when I taught Introduction to Natural Science with Kaye V. Ladd and Betty Estes and . . . was Rob Knapp . . . Rob Knapp might have been the physicist. Mike Beug was in that group. I taught that more than once. I'm confused about which was which. But anyway, we read *Atlas Shrugged*. [laughter] Okay.

Kahan: Well, we did it like a soap opera, the students. Because it's a thick book, and it's, you know, it's really a slog, but it—and, it's ludicrous, so, with all this stuff about—basically, it's pushing a social Darwinist position. You're born with these good genes—you're blond, you're tall, you like Scandinavian

furniture—or otherwise, you’re ugly and stupid and greedy, and all that kind of stuff. And so we had the students read different parts, and tell each other the story. That was kind of fun.

Fiksdal: Oh, yeah.

Kahan: And that was a book I had not—I picked it, but I didn’t realize how it was a very good seminar book. So, yeah, I got to read a lot of things that I wouldn’t otherwise have read. I got different views on books that I had read previously.

I remember one thing you told me—so, we must have read that in this, in some class—anyhow, that *The Handmaid’s Tale* was about language. Okay? It was about language. That never occurred to me, and when I reread it, I could see all that stuff that you were talking about. That was very cool. Yeah. So, I learned all kinds of things. The undergraduate education I never had. [laughing]

Fiksdal: Yeah. I just wonder if that had something to do with the fact that you stayed. I mean, you had a couple of tough years at the beginning.

Kahan: I didn’t stay, I didn’t stay all the time, because there were three years in there—as a result of that horrible class, where we had the fight between the mathematician and the physicist and everything—that was the second—either the first- or the second-hardest class I ever taught in; I knitted a whole dress in 10 weeks, mediating between these two who I thought were going to physically come to blows in faculty seminar; it was just awful—and started reading the want ads in science again, and saw this want ad for a position at National Science Foundation for science education. And I was pretty sure I was not the person they wanted. My vision of who they were looking for would be a person who was—I was about, I might have been about 35 at the time. I was pretty young, so I thought, you know, somebody who’s older, somebody who’s been perhaps the chairman of a department, somebody who has Y chromosomes. [laughter] Somebody who has had a grant, and maybe published a paper or two, none of which applied to me. So, you know, it was like playing football after the flag is thrown. It was a free play.

So, I wrote this number two of the crazy letters. I said—they said something about interdisciplinary, I’m pretty sure, innovative, I don’t know. Anyhow, I wrote this letter and I said, “Well, I’m teaching here at Evergreen, and I’ve taught these interdisciplinary programs. And here at Evergreen, we threw out everything that was conventional—labs, lectures, student-faculty distinctions, homework, rigor, furniture.” [laughter] “Gradually, we’ve had to bring most of these back. We were going to teach the students all math through self-paced learning, saving the faculty for greater things. But I have yet to see the student who’s completed a course in self-paced calculus. And it’s not clear what the faculty is saving themselves for anyhow.” [laughter]

Fiksdal: You wrote that in the letter?

Kahan: I did! And “What can I do for NSF? I can help prevent your grantees from making serious errors. And, by the way, it’s not too convenient for me to come when you’re advertising the position for anyhow.” [laughter]

And I circulated it. I mean, it was really a blast at Evergreen, and it was meant for consumption by my faculty colleagues. But I sent the letter, and I got hired. [laughter] And when I came to NSF, the personnel people took me around and said, “Look, this is the one we got from the position open ad.” Because most of these jobs were, you know, there was an “in” route; somebody who knew somebody, you know, who’d say, “You should apply for this,” or whatever. So, anyhow, I got the job. And I went off for three years.

Fiksdal: Yeah, three years is a long time.

Kahan: Right, yes. By that time, I’d calmed down.

Fiksdal: So, that was early on.

Kahan: It was 1977 to ’80.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: Yeah, so I’d been teaching here for seven years, something like that.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: Six years.

Fiksdal: Well, when you mentioned the networking way of getting a job, I just thought about Pat Labine. Did you tell her about Evergreen, or did she—how did she come?

Kahan: She didn’t write to me about the job. When she came out, I drove her around, and tried to show her the town, and tell her, you know, it was a good place and stuff like that, and that it was a good place to live and all that. But I didn’t have anything to do with hiring her.

Fiksdal: Oh, okay. That also reminds me of something. I mean, what did you think of Olympia and Evergreen when you first got here? Well, of course, Evergreen wasn’t even built.

Kahan: Right. Oh, yeah, when I came out for interview—

Fiksdal: So, you were clearly very tolerant about that.

Kahan: Well, I just wanted to get out of Yellow Springs. [laughter] And I wanted to come back west. You know, I grew up in California, and I liked the West. Antioch was a tiny blue spot in the midst of a sea of red, and I did not like anything about the Midwest. Antioch was a good place when the students weren’t on strike, however. I’m really glad I, you know, it was a lucky decision for me, because Antioch basically went broke and belly-up for a while. So, who knows what I would have done at that point?

Kahan: Yeah, so I was happy to come back to the West. And when I came out here for the interview, it was the middle of February. It was 40 degrees here, but it was minus 10 in Yellow Springs, Ohio. My radiator actually froze in my car while I was there, you know. I could not wait to leave the Midwest. And I was so busy teaching at the college, I hardly noticed Olympia until years later. [laughing] You know, I was able to buy a house here, which is cool.

Fiksdal: So, how long were you in this house?

Kahan: I bought the house during the first year I was here.

Fiksdal: Oh, the very first year?

Kahan: Yeah. There was a big snowstorm in February of that year, I guess. And I was living in this little apartment downtown, and I got snowed in, and I got a very bad case of cabin fever. And so, I sort of was investigating the possibility of having a house. I wanted a house with a view of the Olympics. That was my only criterion. It didn't occur to me to ask, what is the water source? What kind of electricity does it have? Is there a foundation? [laughter] Any of those things. But I did check to see that it had a view of the Olympics, which it no longer has.

Kahan: So, yeah, so I bought the house in about May of that year.

Fiksdal: But that also tied you to Evergreen.

Kahan: Yes.

Fiksdal: In a very strong way. So . . .

Kahan: Yeah, and I used to run off during the summer. I went up to Friday Harbor to do research, and I went to Pullman for several years to do research with a gal that's on the faculty there. And so I was hardly ever here, unfortunately, in the summer when it's really nice.

Fiksdal: Yeah. And I'm wondering about your sense of yourself as a teacher, and how you might have developed over the years with your educational philosophy. I mean, you came from a very demanding college education. You were successful. And you came to Evergreen, where, through interdisciplinary studies, you don't necessarily get students trained the way you might have been.

Kahan: Well, yeah. Okay, now we're back as my undergraduate years. Okay. So, I never thought beyond graduation day, basically, as an undergraduate. I was possibly the most naïve senior to ever graduate from Berkeley.

But I tell you, in Dr. Smith's class, I learned—up until the point when I got in that class, I was a very good student, measured by the usual measures, which is tests. I did well, I was a good test-taker and stuff like that. But, I never thought of thinking for myself at all. And I believed that everything that you needed to know for a class was in the textbook. Well, in the class where students learned to write

their research, their Ph.D. thesis, we had a textbook, but I'm probably the only person in the whole world that's ever read this textbook, because it's a big monograph, where the idea is to get you into the literature.

So, I learned about doing research, about being a scholar. You know, as an undergraduate, my mindset was kind of like the high school model is. Okay, so we're going to pour all this knowledge into you, and your job is to regurgitate it back when the time comes and stuff. But . . . so, Smith's class was a real eye-opener for me. And I also learned in that class—because turning out all those scientific papers, and taking my other classes, too, etc., I learned how much I could actually—you know, I hadn't been stressed up until that point. I learned how much I could do. And how satisfying it was actually to have accomplished all this.

And I think that strongly influenced my educational philosophy. You get out of it what you put into it. Previously, I'd just been rewarded for doing what I was supposed to do, more or less. So, that was a real eye-opener for me. So, I think I carried that into my teaching throughout my career. I never had a lot of patience for people who were kind of sliding by, or who weren't into it, or weren't willing to work, or whatever.

And also, back in my undergraduate career, I said that taking this world literature class was an eye-opener for me. A life-changing experience. So, I took God knows how many courses over four years—more than four years as an undergraduate—and there were two classes that actually stood out for me—the world literature class and this invertebrate physiology class that I took—that changed my life. And, from that experience, I took, I think, that, in terms of teaching philosophy, is . . . not every teacher is good for every student.

Oh, yeah, okay. So, back to the world literature class, which I was taking as a high school student. And my friend, Susie Willson, and I used to go to class at UCLA three times a week in the afternoon, and we would listen to these lectures by the Professor Pier Maria Pasinetti, who was a medical doctor, but also a Ph.D. in literature, world literature. He had read all of the works that we studied in class in the original language, with the exception of the Russian novels, and the Bible in Hebrew. And could quote from them from memory. It was fabulous! I loved this class! I sat in the center of the front row, under his three-nostrilled nose [laughter] and took down every word I could possibly get down on the page, and stuff like that. It was a fantastic class.

So, I saw Susie Willson maybe at our 25th high school reunion, and I'm reminiscing, and I say, "So, Susie, do you remember that class in world literature that we took with Dr. Pasinetti? What did you think?" And she goes "Meh, it wasn't anything special." [laughing]

Fiksdal: Oh, my gosh!

Kahan: So, you know, from this, I take—and Smith was kind of like the department ogre. He scared the bejesus out of all these very advanced graduate students, and also his faculty colleagues. Nobody crossed him. Nobody said a bad word about him. But, from me, he was just the right teacher at the time that I needed it. I needed somebody to kick my ass, and really show me the value of hard work.

Fiksdal: And you had a mentor. He thought about what you would do after—

Kahan: Yes, he got me a number of opportunities. You know? And he knew who I was, and he [chuckles] told me off when I needed to be told off. You know? So, even these graduate students were afraid of his legendary temper and all that, and his colleagues as well. But for me, he was a great teacher.

So, what I took from that was not everybody can be the right teacher for every student all the time. But every once in a while, two classes out of all those undergraduates classes— in which I didn't learn nothing, but I didn't get anything beyond what I could memorize, and then later, forget. That leads me to think that if I can do some good things for some students every year, some students, there would be, out of 100 students, there would be a student or two who would, you know, would get it. And, I wasn't going to try to make everybody happy. You know? And I'm sure I didn't make everybody happy! [laughing]

And in my portfolios, you know, when I would go for evaluation, you could see. There is like completely dichotomous curve on the evaluations. For some students, I shouldn't be allowed to teach at the college; I was too tough; this was not the Evergreen way. And for other students, I was the greatest thing since sliced bread. So.

Fiksdal: It's helpful to have both, I mean, to have the good student—yeah, in times like that, because it's really hard to read the evaluations that they write.

Kahan: Right. Well, and then, you know, later. So, I wasn't . . . I am not the easiest person in the world to get along with, but—and I'm not the hold-your-hand kind of, it's-okay-you're-a-good-person kind of faculty member. But, on my team with David Paulsen, he was the good guy, and I could be all the bad guy I wanted to. [laughter] David prevented me from actually, you know, committing faculty suicide or anything. But the students knew not to bother me [laughing] with their little day-to-day problems.

Fiksdal: Yeah. Well, we do have that. I mean, we are close to the students in so many ways. We use our first names. They tend to think of us as counselors as well as . . . and sometimes even friends.

Kahan: Mm-mm.

Fiksdal: Well, let's just turn now to, I guess, you were Chair of the faculty at one time? And anything about governance that you might want to mention—how well you thought it worked, did it help make the college better?

Kahan: It was a year in which not much happened. There were no student uprisings, there weren't, I don't think, any contentious things that came up to the agenda committee. Things went along, just got along. And I kept my head down, and hoped that I'd get through the year without having to deal with any of those things. And, sure enough. So, it was a non-event, pretty much.

Fiksdal: Oh, that's good. So, when you think about Evergreen now—or not exactly right now, necessarily, but just in retrospect—how do you think Evergreen sort of has changed? Or, has it changed, I mean, from those first years, to later years?

Kahan: Well, we brought back almost all the things that were on my list. [laughing] So, there was that. I think, you know, we did improve the evaluation system, to some extent. There were no more evaluations being turned in with just handprints.

Fiksdal: I heard about that.

Kahan: Yes. We—well, I, I don't know about other people, but I developed a method of writing evaluations for students. I did not discuss their personality, I talked about their work. And, for me, it wasn't the same as a letter of recommendation. It was just a description of what they did, and how well I thought they did it, and whether they met the requirements of the class or not. So, we got—and I assume other people developed a better way to write their own evaluations.

Fiksdal: Do you remember, when we first came to Evergreen, there was no tenure, just three-year evaluations.

Kahan: Right. It's definitely an improvement to get property right to the job. There was a lot of anxiety. The airy-fairy way that people were thinking about faculty and jobs and things like that went by the wayside, which was a good thing. Yeah, tenure was also on the list of things we got rid of, but which came back in a way. Yeah, that definitely helped. There was something else that you mentioned.

Fiksdal: I'm trying to remember my whole question.

Kahan: Yeah, I think, with your help, people learned how to do seminars better. Oh, I'll tell you one thing that was a great improvement that was related to this tenure thing. All right. So, when we first came, one of the crazy ideas that people had, had to do with evaluations. "Oh, we're all going to evaluate. We're going to evaluate the deans, the faculty will evaluate the students, students with evaluate"—duh dah duh dah.

So, this evaluation portfolio system got set up. And the really bad aspect of it—I mean, evaluation in moderation is probably a very good thing—but what happened with this system was, so, the evaluations that students wrote of faculty, and faculty wrote of each other, I guess, the faculty wrote of students, and the deans wrote of faculty, they all got collected into these big, fat notebooks. And when you went for your evaluation, not only did you have your evaluation with a dean, but you could see every evaluation that the dean had written of every other faculty member, warts and all.

And this was like one of the most pernicious gossip-mongering kinds of things. People who—you know, the dean is just a person, and they don't hardly see you in your teaching situation. Only in a few little isolated incidents and stuff like that. So, they really actually don't know what's going on. And so, they write these things. And they may or may not be true, or helpful, or . . . yeah, a good reflection of what's going on. And they are circulated to all your faculty colleagues, which sets up a system of, you know, "Well, I'm not teaching with that person, because the dean said"—or, "I read somewhere"—whatever. You know, word would get out about all kinds of mostly negative things that were said about people in those evaluations. And that was really terrible.

Fiksdal: I was under that system, too. I remember one year—I only remember that one year, because I got an incomprehensible evaluation from my dean. And, in order to understand it, I looked through other evaluations he had written. [laughter] Very strange, yeah.

Kahan: It was pernicious. It was worse than strange. And there was, an appeal system which I did on at least one occasion, you could try appealing an evaluation that a dean wrote about you. But, of course, it was circulating in those portfolios and stuff, so the damage was done. The dean might eventually, at some point, decide to take it back, or not, but, you know, all those things, based on alternate facts, got circulated. So, I was thrilled when that went away. I . . . you know, yeah, that was very bad.

Fiksdal: So, you're remembering some improvement. By the time you retired, did you feel that we were running pretty well, I mean, that Evergreen—I mean, it could always be changed, but . . .

Kahan: Yeah. In many ways, yes. I'm not sure how well the—because I kind of got into a routine at the end of my career there, where I was teaching with David Paulsen every other year, and various psychologists who were all, had been around for quite a bit. So, I didn't see how new faculty were being oriented. And so, I know, you know, I think it's very important with something that as different—because faculty are still being recruited from having had their education at regular institutions, and being well socialized into those systems, and they come into this place, and it doesn't quite work like that, especially for science faculty, I think.

Maybe it's different for humanities and social science. But it strikes me that it certainly took us—because we were forming the college—to figure out how to do it. But I think orienting—now, the new faculty that come in have the situation where faculty say this to each other in faculty meetings. “We’ve never done it that way, so we’re not going to have a semester system, we’re not going to do this, we’re not going to have requirements.” Whatever it is, “We’ve never done it that way.” And it was certainly true in that year that we taught together. It was like “This is how it’s going to be done.”

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: And your new faculty member will have quite a struggle. So, I see that as something that at least needs attention.

Fiksdal: Mm-mm.

Kahan: In the beginning, when there were only 1,000 students and 50 faculty, everyone was pretty much on the same page. Now, there's a whole separate campus in Tacoma. There's part-time studies. There's sort of what you'd expect, the undergraduate studies on campus. I have no idea, you know, so there's a lot more diversity, and I don't think those other parts of the college—the Tacoma campus and the part-time faculty—were ever well integrated with the faculty teaching in the Olympia full-time, undergraduate program—and also, the master's programs, the same thing, although those faculty sort of rotate in with the undergraduates, so they're a little more in tune. But I don't think there's good input, integration of those other parts of the college into the college. And if I were a faculty member in there, I would wonder if I was part of the college or not. The flipside of which is, if nobody knows anything, you can do whatever it is you want to do, [laughing] and nobody pays any, you know, no one will basically be the wiser, and you can have your own little fiefdom there. And that certainly has happened within the undergraduate area, as well as some of these other areas. So, that can use some attention, I think.

Fiksdal: Yeah. So, any more thoughts about memorable people in your career? They could be administrators, they could be colleagues, students, staff people.

Kahan: Well, there's a ton of them.

Fiksdal: Would you like to go into that?

Kahan: Well, yeah. I mean, it's just . . . there have been all kinds of characters. Joe Olander was one. Dan Evans. Merv Cadwallader. So, there were a lot of memorable characters around. I had some great colleagues teaching with different people. Yeah. I've definitely had memorable students. There are always some that stand out every year. I still hear from the occasional one. So, yeah, I was very pleased

when we had the—was it Evergreen at 40? Whatever that big hoo-ha was. So, there six graduates who were panelists, and three of them had been my students.

Kahan: You know? Maya, and Calvin Johnson and Polly Newcomb, she has an important research job up at Fred Hutch. And she made a big effort to come and find me, which was great. So, yeah, I had a lot of really good students.

Almost every year, somebody's pleased with as a result of their interaction with me. I have had the flipside. I don't remember what the thing I was going to—okay, so there were quite a few advantages to being known as kind of a hard ass. [laughter] One of which was I didn't frequently have to deal with a lot of trivial student problems. But, toward the end of my teaching career, students were enrolling in the programs I was teaching in because they were known to be hard, because they were known to be demanding. And some of them even came back for more. After having done, say, Science of Mind, they would come to Evolutionary Biology. I taught that several times, and those were pretty successful classes. So, there was a place where people felt there was a compatibility with my reputation that worked out well for me.

Fiksdal: Yeah. Are there other things that you thought I might ask, or anything else that you would like to add?

Kahan: I think we've covered more than I thought you would ask. [laughing] I did not expect to get into personality issues. [chuckles]

Fiksdal: I think that's part of our life. We worked so closely with people.

Kahan: Yes. Well, and one of the things about working here is your ability to work in a group.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: It's one of the hardest aspects of teaching here, and I think we developed—we needed to, and we did develop skills that way. Yeah, it's not your ordinary teaching job, for sure.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: My impression when the college—okay, so now we're back to when I came here, and, you know, things started rolling, and we got assigned programs and all this, it became very clear that the faculty had all, with a few exceptions—there were some people that came from SUNY Stony Brook . . .

Fiksdal: . . . and other experimental [places? 00:50:01].

Kahan: Yeah, I think that was the most experimental.

Fiksdal: Old Westbury?

Kahan: Old Westbury, that's right. It wasn't SUNY Stony Brook, it was out there somewhere. Old Westbury, and Oberlin. Oberlin is really a traditional school, it's not—it's small, but it's a traditional

school. Yeah, so most of the faculty had come out of regular traditional teaching schools through their whole education. And, to the extent that they'd worked other places in their professional career, they had taught in regular kinds of things, regular classes, regular departments, regular everything.

And pretty much everybody, I think, came with the idea of "Well, when I was at Institution X, I hated having departments with department chairmen," or, "having a faculty senate," or, "having to give grades," or, "getting grades," or whatever. So, everybody came knowing what they didn't want to see, but very few actually had a coherent picture of how things were going to work when we got rid of all that stuff. But we did create something positive in the end.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: And it's amazing that we actually made anything work, considering. And I don't think very many people think of the college that way, or think of what happened that way. But, that's my personal take.

Fiksdal: No, I think we did develop an ethos, a way of thinking about things.

Kahan: Right. But a lot of it was started in a negative approach. Like, what is the most—what is the thing that you'd like to get—if you could build your own college, what is the thing that you would get rid of?

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Kahan: And we did. And gradually, we did have to bring quite a lot of them back to create our different institution.

Fiksdal: Mm-mm. Great. Well, thanks.

Kahan: Oh, you're welcome.

End Part 2 of 2 of Linda Kahan on 9-21-17