

Susan Fiksdal
Interviewed by Nancy Taylor
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Final, part 3

Taylor: You've been retired two years?

Fiksdal: Since 2013, so six years.

Taylor: Oh! Six years. Did you do a post-retirement contract?

Fiksdal: I did. I requested and got a post-retirement contract, but when the time came to actually prepare to teach, I couldn't do it. [chuckles] I was exhausted. Teaching really takes a lot of time.

The first year after retirement, I was asked to go back as interim dean for one quarter by Michael Zimmerman. I was happy to do it because they had an issue. Two deans retired or resigned and so they needed a Dean of the Library, but not directing the Library. They had a Library Director but they needed someone for all the other desk assignments.

Taylor: What was your job?

Fiksdal: When we were deans. We walked into our weekly meeting. We were ready, we had an agenda, we had our notes, and we knew what we had done before. And so we talked face-to-face, and we got through the agenda somehow, and it was just really hard. Every week, it was too much. This meeting, everyone comes in, they open up their laptops, and start looking at their e-mail. Then Michael starts talking, someone else might talk, and no one's making eye contact. I'm the only one sitting there with no laptop. Michael's got his laptop. They're all doing at least two or three things at the same time. It was so disconcerting.

Taylor: Wow!

Fiksdal: So here was my job. My job was to create a conversation. I made several comments about it. But I have to say, there were times when someone said, "We really need to contact that person," and Nancy Murray would say, "I'll just text him right now." [laughing] I have to say, that was very effective to text someone immediately and get an answer.

Taylor: But you didn't have a responsibility. Why did they think they needed you?

Fiksdal: Because you have to have a certain number of deans because of all the work.

Taylor: But what work did you do?

Well, I'm having a little trouble remembering it, Nancy. I'm just trying to think what my role was. I know. Projects. I ran all of the six-year reviews. Things like that. I ran everything they didn't want to do—late evaluations, probably. I did all kinds of stuff that just has to get done.

Taylor: But still the Curriculum Dean was there, the Hiring and Faculty Development Dean was there, the Part-time Studies Dean was there, the First-Year Curriculum or something person was there.

Fiksdal: That person wasn't there.

Taylor: The Budget Dean was there.

Fiksdal: Yeah. I think Bill had left, the Evening and Weekend Dean had retired suddenly.

Taylor: Dean Olson maybe?

Fiksdal: No, it was . . . the psychologist.

Taylor: George Freeman. That's right.

Fiksdal: It turned out it wasn't what he wanted to be doing in his last year or so of the college.

Taylor: I think he retired.

Fiksdal: Yeah, he retired. Then the Dean of the Library, it just wasn't a job for him. He couldn't do it, and so he left, so we were down two deans.

Taylor: Yeah, he went to Japan. That was the one that did so much with Native American Studies.

Fiksdal: Yes. Jef Antonelis Lapp. Really good person, but not cut out to be a dean.

Taylor: Yeah.

Fiksdal: It was just a quarter, but it was so different from my previous experiences. Our perfect Provost, the model in our minds, is Barbara, and Michael Zimmerman was so different. Very hierarchical. At one point, I questioned him—more than once, maybe twice or I might even say three times—about something, because I really thought he was wrong, and he started screaming at me. I just looked at him.

At another point, they were arguing about something and I said, "Okay, I feel the need to come in here and say something." Dead silence. I said, "Our job as deans is to help the faculty to do things, which is basically teaching, researching, working with students. We have to help them do all of those things. That's our job." And it was like "Oh, really? I thought my job was something else."

Taylor: Good for you.

Fiksdal: I think I helped drum a little sense into Michael Zimmerman, but not entirely. I was also happy to do this job because when I retired, I really wanted to start this teaching and learning center.

Taylor: Oh, that's right.

Fiksdal: I had talked to Michael about it previously, when I was still working, and it didn't pencil out, according to him and Nancy Murray, even though I thought they didn't understand my model. But also, I'm not a real budget person, so maybe I didn't present it well. Yes, it would have cost money. Yes, but not very much. And I really wanted that. I even spoke about it to the Board of Trustees when I was honored with emeritus status. So, I kept pushing for the center while I was dean. Anyway, that didn't happen.

The next year of my post-retirement, the college needed a grant writer, and they decided on me because I had that post-retirement contract. It was easy to hire me because I was already on the books. They asked me to write a grant that would include having a new teaching and learning center, so, of course, I wanted to do it. This hadn't been really vetted with the faculty. The administration wanted me to write it.

I found out that pedagogy is an actual discipline, and that we have faculty who know it, and they're all in MIT. I started working closely with them. They started helping me, and I was reading all these papers and then rewriting a grant that Emily Lardner had written two years prior, and we had not gotten the money. It was really expected, if you submit a second time to the U.S. Department of Education, you'll probably be successful if you responded to all their queries, because we weren't going to change too many things. I worked on it and worked on it, and rewrote that grant.

Then the top two deans didn't read anything until the very end. It was due on a Monday at 4:00 and it ended up being 20 seconds late. John McLain sent it. Usually his assistant does, and there never has been a problem. He didn't realize that you can't send it at 3:59 to meet a 4pm deadline, because the internet is not instantaneous. He should have sent it—the day before would have been good, for example, but he didn't. He couldn't for one reason because the two Vice Presidents kept it until really late Sunday night, and then he had it Monday, revising and making it fit the word count. He just was 20 seconds late, and so it wasn't submitted. They counted it as not done, and I worked over six months on that.

Taylor: So it never got submitted?

Fiksdal: No. It was on a two-year cycle, and when Trump was elected president, the Education Department funds dried up.

Taylor: But they're going to do something now?

Fiksdal: A lot of things came out of it. John worked a couple of innovations from it into another grant, and we do have a center now. Instead of teaching and learning, it's called learning and teaching.

Taylor: And it was incorporated into the Washington Center, I think.

Fiksdal: Which it had to do, which I had insisted on.

Taylor: And we didn't get any money to support it.

Fiksdal: No, it was going to be \$5 million over three years. It was just so sad.

Taylor: They can't submit it again, or they don't want to?

Fiksdal: Then Trump got elected and there's no money.

Taylor: Well, there we are. That makes you feel good.

Fiksdal: The third year, I'm coming down from a hike from Mount Elinor with Allen, and I get a text from Brian Walter, who I love, saying, "Could you come teach with us? Fall quarter starts next Monday." This was Thursday. "Fall quarter starts Monday, and Toska Olson is really sick. She doesn't think she can teach the whole time. She said she's going to teach exactly what she taught with you, just before you retired"—because that was the last program I taught—it was a wonderful program—with Toska Olson, about doing gender. I took the language aspect and she took the sociological aspect. It was a really wonderful program. She's terrific. We worked well together. It was very integrated.

I thought about two seconds and I thought, well, I like Toska, I like Brian. I've never taught with Steven Hendricks, but I used to talk with him all the time because his office was on my hall. So, I thought, it will be fine.

The books had been ordered. I was supposed to do seminars and correct all the papers. Well, this turned out to be the lion's share of the work, of course, because Toska had the lectures done from before. She was so sick, so she would just come in sometimes for lectures. Then I went to all parts of the program because I didn't know what in the world was going on. That cured me from teaching ever, because that was a first-year program.

Taylor: That was your post-retirement contract?

Fiksdal: Post-retirement.

Taylor: So you got paid.

Fiksdal: I got paid half-time. But we all agreed that's what it would be because Toska had to be in the program. I couldn't teach her field.

Taylor: She did come?

Fiksdal: She was there, but not for everything. She drove from Tacoma, and she was really sick. Driving was hard for her. She would get these migraines. She didn't know what was wrong with her. They were going through all these tests, and this had been going on for a while.

Taylor: And she has children, doesn't she?

Fiksdal: She has one son who's brilliant. I taught the seminars. After two weeks, my seminars usually coalesce and we're moving into deeper learning. This one wasn't doing anything. I had three people talking, and even sometimes one wouldn't talk, so I'd have two. I just couldn't get them fired up to talk. Well, we were reading a very difficult book by Virginia Woolf, an experimental novel called *The Waves*. I'd never read it before.

Taylor: Well, that's her easiest. [laughing]

Fiksdal: No, I would say there are easier books.

Taylor: She's not easy.

Fiksdal: This one, you don't know what's going on. There's no plot. The characters kind of come in and out, and they're different ages. It's a very strange book. I have read several of her books, but not that one.

I knew the book was difficult. I didn't know what the problem was, so I finally thought, I'll just ask them. I only have 18 students, because now we only have 18 if it's a first-year program. I said, "How many of you have read a whole book in your lives?"

Now, if anyone had asked me that in college when I was 18, I would have gotten up and left the college, thinking, "What is this? Weird. I want to go to a place where people think and read." Do you know how many raised their hands? Five! Five students had read a whole book in their entire lives, and the others had not.

Taylor: Oh, my.

Fiksdal: These students not only did not know how to read a book—any book. I know it's hard at Evergreen because we're throwing all kinds of different genres at them. But these students didn't know how to read, they didn't know how to study, they didn't know how to manage time, they weren't intellectually inspired. They were in college because that's what you do. You come to college.

For some reason, I had the people of color in my seminar. Maybe I had suggested that, I can't remember now. So, there were only three, and that was also very sad that there were only three. It was a difficult quarter, where students didn't really do much work.

Taylor: This was 2015?

Fiksdal: 2017.

Taylor: This was really recently.

Fiksdal: And I gave lots of no credit, more than I ever have before. I think four people in my seminar got no credit whatsoever.

Taylor: Wow.

Fiksdal: Most people got partial credit. The students weren't prepared, and we weren't doing anything to prepare them. We should have changed everything.

Taylor: What was the rest of the team thinking? Were they having the same trouble?

Fiksdal: Yeah, but they'd been having that trouble for a while, and they just figured they would teach to the best students, like we always have. But you can't do it anymore. That's what I had learned writing that grant. I had read this book. Before, we used to say, "You're not college-ready." But now what we have to do is be student-ready. We have to change the way we're doing things.

Taylor: You have to teach the students that come.

Fiksdal: Yeah. Not everyone is doing that, but they're on track to do it now. They have Jadon Berry, someone who is in Student Services, working with a dean, Trevor Speller. They are working to make much better first-year experiences, really a coherent first-year experience for the first time ever.

Taylor: And recognizing the kind of students that are coming.

Fiksdal: Recognizing the students that are coming. Also realizing that one of the things that we always wanted for students to feel is some connection to the college, and some faithfulness to it, some attachment. The only reason our sales were going up for Evergreen paraphernalia was the foreign students that come and buy all that stuff. But students, over and over, would report that they did not feel connected.

They encouraged students to create more clubs. They've been doing a whole lot of work to try and help students feel more connected and more supported. I've seen more clubs come into being with students, and I always thought that was fine and good. But this is different now.

The other thing, Trevor Speller went to a first-year experience conference and here are all kinds of universities that are doing this, and our faculty know nothing about it. No one at Evergreen knew one thing about it, and no one was trying to make sure that people had roughly the same experiences. So, in the first-year programs, people are just planning them as they used to.

Taylor: One of the Evergreen problems is not learning from anybody else, because we're so special and so unique, we can't—

Fiksdal: And what's the use? If you're not teaching them to read and write in a first-year program, then what's going to happen in the future? They have to learn certain skills, and quantitative reasoning, you can't just say it. You've got to do it. That's what they're working on with the faculty, and the faculty voted to create the First Year Experience with learning objectives in common.

Taylor: Do you think that the morale is improving?

Fiksdal: Yeah, it's the people that have retired that are sort of saying, "Arrghh! The college is going downhill." And the people that are inspired by this first-year experience idea and the new way of thinking about pedagogy again, they're the ones that seem gung-ho.

Taylor: Oh, good.

Fiksdal: But there are a bunch of people that distrust all thinking about pedagogy. They think, I am this kind of a person, and I teach well, and my students like me. So at some point, they're going to have to change their minds because not everybody is going to be able to keep up. There's a point where you can't keep paying faculty to teach four students. You just can't do it.

Taylor: Right. And I think the student body has changed remarkably in terms of preparation. Something like maybe more than 50 percent are students whose parents have never been to college, so they're first generation.

Fiksdal: First generation, and the poverty level among the students is really high.

Taylor: They have just no model of what it is to be a student. The last program I taught in was one of the best I ever taught in, actually, with Andrew Reece and Nancy Koppelman. I'm still in touch with those students. That was in 2003.

Fiksdal: Wow.

Taylor: And in my fall seminar, where we did have probably 22 or 25 students, four of those students have PhDs now and I've kept up with them. That was a seminar that immediately clicked, and if

someone didn't come to seminar, they'd call them up and say, "Where are you?" It was unbelievable. But those students were all totally prepared to be in college.

Fiksdal: Ten years later, you have a majority of students who are unprepared, and still, some brilliant ones coming. So you have no one in the middle. That middle went away, you always would have five great students—fabulous students—and then a middle, and then a couple that just weren't.

Taylor: But now, I don't know that you have the five great students.

Fiksdal: No.

Taylor: Because unfortunately, why should they come if they're in what feels like remedial classes?

Fiksdal: Yeah, and you can't be in a seminar where no one talks. If you're the only one talking, that's not going to work either. That's why I think that my book *A Guide to Teaching Seminars: Conversation, Identity Power* is already a little outdated. I'd like to revise it; go back to some studies and think about more structured ways of organizing seminar.

Taylor: That would be a different book.

Fiksdal: It's got to be structured. Yeah, it could be a completely different book. That's right.

Taylor: So you basically have no contact with the college now?

Fiksdal: No, that was the last. Those were all invitations from people at the college. I didn't propose anything more. I was pretty much done then, because I retired when I was 67, and I was getting tired. I was happy to go back and do things, and I felt honored to do it. I had expertise to give, and I feel like I did well. But I finally realized I don't need it anymore. So this retirement business, it's not easy for everyone. It was telling that I couldn't teach again because I just—I mean, it is so much work, I just couldn't face it.

Instead, what am I doing? Early on when I retired, I became a reading buddy, because my oldest grandchild was in kindergarten and I wanted to know what they do in kindergarten. I was completely surprised to find out they learned to read in kindergarten, where my kids sure didn't, and I didn't. I became a reading buddy, and I just have gone through each grade with him. He's in fourth grade now, and I'm in a fourth-grade classroom. I'm in Olympia and he's in Renton, but I get a sense of what they're learning, what they're like. I'm working usually with the lower-level kids.

Taylor: Do you go up to the school?

Fiksdal: It's just L. P. Brown, right close. No, I don't go to his school. The point is I just know what fourth grade is like. I have a sense of it.

Taylor: You go to L. P. Brown, and it's come full circle.

Fiksdal: Yeah. So that's through United Way that I do that work. That's all I do for volunteering. I thought I would do much more. It's one hour a week, and it's all I can do to manage it, really. [laughing]

Taylor: Is there a teacher there named Wendy?

Fiksdal: Oh, maybe. I only work with one person and then I'm out of there.

Taylor: Okay, because she was an Evergreen graduate that got a job there. She was an intern there when I was teaching in the MIT [Masters in Teaching] program, and then she got hired. She was a wonderful, wonderful teacher. I went back several years later and she was still there. She might still be there.

Fiksdal: It wouldn't surprise me. That Evergreen MIT degree, I found out, has very high staff value now, or has for the last 15 or 20 years. It's been very, very big.

When I was first going to schools with my kids and talking to teachers of my children, Evergreen wasn't really known. They didn't know what was going on out there. But it took about five more years and it's the better degree.

Taylor: I taught in that program twice, and I often said, "We made better teachers out of people than you would ever imagine." Some people are natural teachers, and some people can be taught to be good teachers. We did that.

Fiksdal: You did. That program is a solid program, and having it last two years, and having the teaching, and then coming back to reflect, and then teaching again. It's a wonderful design, wonderful program.

What else? One of the other things, I had talked to Linda Kahan. She's a friend and I taught with her in a program that didn't go so well, but we were fine, she and I. We had a colleague that made it very difficult that year. I had always heard that programs could fall apart. We were determined that this program would not fall apart. We were determined that students wouldn't know, but we could hardly talk to each other.

Taylor: Oh, dear.

Fiksdal: It was very difficult. Anyway, she and I were fine. Andrew Buchman—he's got another name now.

Taylor: He's called Drew.

Fiksdal: Drew. He was great, too. The other person, well, it was Kirk Thompson. He was just impossible, so he made it very, very difficult.

Anyway, Linda and I have known each other for a long time, and she's had these parties and we'd go to the parties, New Year's Eve all the time. So, I talked to her about retirement, and she said she went to the Valley, which is a gym, and she said it really structured her days to go in the mornings, and then everything else would be afternoon. Like lunch with friends or doctors' appointments, whatever she had to do, it would be afternoons. So Allen and I started doing that, and it's been wonderful, where you stay really in shape, and we know lots of people there, and you meet more people. So it's a social opening.

Taylor: The one in Tumwater?

Fiksdal: Yeah. They have lots of classes that are free, like yoga and Pilates. They have a pool. We have grandchildren, so we can take the grandchildren to swim. Our lives now are the gym and grandkids, helping out if we can, just getting them together so they know each other because they live in different cities. And gardening, as you can see, is a big thing, and then travel. I'd say retirement is good.

I miss the close companionship of Evergreen. When you're teaching we used to joke that we were married to each other. I remember walking with Rachel Hastings one time, we're talking as we're walking and we're trying to get things done. She runs into I think it was Brian Walter—someone she knows very well because they're both mathematicians—and she says, "Oh, hi, Brian. I can't talk to you right now. I'm with Susan now." [laughter] I thought it was just so funny because it's true. You marry each other. You know all about each other. You're just constantly in contact. And then it's over. And then there's someone else. [laughing]

Taylor: Yeah, and you're supposed to adjust to that kind of . . .

Fiksdal: And you do. You just naturally fall into this. It was wonderful. You really get to know people well. I miss all of that, but I think that lifelong learning has a lot to say for it, too. For me, it's studying another language before I go somewhere. When we travel, we usually are on our own. I stammer through with whatever language it is, and it's fun. People appreciate it and we learn a lot.

Taylor: But I sometimes have thought about the structure that we have at Evergreen. It really might not be self-sustaining. It's like the books you read about the second-grade teacher who gives her all, and then burns out, because that expectation that you give everything. When I would get in teams and people wouldn't give their all, I really got resentful.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Taylor: Because that was supposed to be their whole life. And that's unreasonable. It's totally unreasonable. But that's the way I taught every year. Every year, you give your all.

Fiksdal: That's exhausting.

Taylor: When I got married, Fritz was in Seattle, but there was no idea that I would move to Seattle, because then I wouldn't be fully a part of the college. So I was down here four days and back in Seattle three. It worked out fine, but that was the expectation I had of myself. There are people at the college that moved to the San Juan Islands or moved to Seattle, and they have a total life outside of the college. I don't know that I like that idea, but I do think it's only reasonable that, yeah. Like when you started raising children, there were some limits on what you were willing to do.

Fiksdal: Absolutely. It's true. You get a little more interested in reducing your class time. But also, I talked to people who didn't have kids and they just wanted to reduce it anyway. Lots of people felt that they shouldn't have to spend 16 hours just because they're teaching 16 credits. In science, they're doing labs, so they have to do way more class time, but they have help with the labs.

Taylor: When I retired, I said, this is the first time—well, when I was dean, the pattern was different. But other than being dean, where every weekend I read a book, and then there were the three weekends during evaluations, the three weekends from hell. That's what you did, and that's what I expected of myself. I don't think it's sustainable.

Fiksdal: No, not this notion. I don't think there are still faculty teaching who believe that their life should be Evergreen. A lot of people we hired that I know—like Nancy Murray and Rachel Hastings and Heather Heying—had their children once they got their job. So there never was an intention, nor did anyone say, "Your life is the college."

And people are not in their offices very much. It's really harder to reach people. But you have social media now and you have all these other ways. I think people have experimented a little more and there's more electronic stuff you can do. I started using it, too, when I went back. You can put readings online and assignments, too. It can be a regular assignment, and you can evaluate it electronically.

Taylor: That's the other reason that I could never teach now. I just can't imagine doing the technology.

Fiksdal: It's not hard, but there are things you have to learn and be able to do. Things have changed quite a bit.

Taylor: Well, it's 50 years. Fifty years.

Fiksdal: Over those years, a lot has changed. I mean, the Internet came in at that time. In the mid-'90s, we were just starting to do e-mail. Wow.

Taylor: Right. There have been huge changes. The other thing is that the adrenaline that ran in you and me in the early years, just because we were at the beginning. We could be nostalgic about it, but there was energy that just didn't stop, and it meant that you could do things wrong and survive it because there was so much energy.

Fiksdal: There was, and there was so much more interest in pedagogy. You would talk about it at lunch. You would talk about ideas that you had and what you might want to do. People were interested, and they'd say, "Well, maybe I'll teach with you someday." Then somehow, you didn't see people at lunch, because we were all eating at our desks because we couldn't get everything done.

I don't know what happened, because in those early years—remember?—we would type out our evaluations. [laughing] We'd type them on these—and there had to be four carbon copies. Ridiculous! I would first write them longhand. I recently saw my program secretary, my very first one, Maureen Karras. She's at my gym. I just looked at her and I said, "Oh my god! Maureen! Can I interview you sometime?" She said, "Well, I don't know if I can remember back that far." [laughing]

Taylor: She was the Registrar's secretary for a while.

Fiksdal: Oh, she was?

Taylor: Maureen Karras and Sally Hunter.

Fiksdal: Oh, I remember Sally Hunter.

Taylor: Ask her about Sally Hunter, because they were friends, and they would have been staff at the same time. They're both in their sixties by now at least, maybe more.

Fiksdal: She doesn't look like it, but maybe she is.

Taylor: She must be 60.

Fiksdal: She said she left the college a long time ago, but still, we were friends. You were friends with your program secretary.

Taylor: Absolutely.

Fiksdal: You'd chat. You had time to chat. I don't know how this all—

Taylor: We even invited the program secretary—I remember the first one—when we went off on evaluation retreats to go be a part of the team.

Fiksdal: Oh, dear. Well, we sure don't think of staff that way anymore.

Taylor: And staff were critical about the way they were treated then.

Fiksdal: But it was so much better.

Taylor: It was better. There's always been a concern about team teaching. How do teams get formed? It was so much by friendship. Now people, I think, feel isolated.

Fiksdal: I don't know how people feel. I haven't talked to anyone who feels isolated. Everyone I've talked to is happy in their work, and they feel like things are going just fine.

Taylor: The morale? Because I've heard that morale is not so fine.

Fiksdal: I think it will be interesting to lead this retirement institute in a month— or in three weeks— and hear what people who are now retiring have to say. They've seen a lot, and the students have changed a lot, and they'll really have a good view, because they're the ones who have been teaching with 30 students in a three-person program. It's just devastating to not have very many students come or be interested in the college. You wonder what's going to happen to the college as a whole.

Taylor: Someone said the enrollment was down 20 percent.

Fiksdal: I don't know. I just read the Provost's report that said they were hoping for a lot of applications and they just didn't get them. They have this new system where you can apply to any Washington college. It's just one application. It's really nice. And Evergreen became a choice for the first time and it didn't yield anything more. So Evergreen has to do a lot more to attract students.

Do you remember quite a long time ago—I think it was in the '90s—Matt Smith, who recently died, I've been thinking about him, and I remember he was on a committee. He was just on a DTF and he was the one that reported out to the faculty. Their suggestion was that we would turn into a junior-senior-level college; that students could go to community college or somewhere else and then transfer in. And we would be teaching, because of interdisciplinary studies, they would have background and we could do a better job. We've never been good at retaining first-year students.

Taylor: But we've also never been very good at doing the advanced work.

Fiksdal: But you get to do advanced work is the idea; that it would be advanced. You would advertise it as advanced, and it could be. I remember standing up and arguing against that, and now I wonder, wow, maybe I was wrong.

I did buy into the whole idea that a student at the beginning could come in and take just four programs—one year-long program each year—and have a wonderful education. It took me, I don't know, five years to realize, no, that's not the way.

Taylor: But that's because the culture has changed. The assumption at the beginning was that we were going to get a full load of 18-year-olds, and they were going to stay at the college for four years, and they were going to do a rationalized curriculum, where they were going to be helped to design their own curriculum with what was offered. And, because it was interdisciplinary, it was going to provide the breadth, and they were going to be able to—I mean, all of these things were imaginary, because the students aren't—and they might not have been that way in 1971 either . . .

Fiksdal: I think more of them were well prepared.

Taylor: . . . but they're not like that now.

Fiksdal: As late as '85, teaching with Charlie Teske, I remember that we produced a syllabus for only five weeks, and gave it to the students. It wasn't more, it was just five weeks, because that's all we had planned, because we were all somewhere else, right before classes started. So, right before class, we drummed out this, I think, very wonderful program, and then we kept building. Students didn't protest, they didn't cry. Well, they weren't working outside the college. Now you have to have all this information so you can plan ahead, and see where the heavy parts are, and if your work schedule will allow it. But back then, you still had the vision of the liberal arts college.

I remember also that it was week eight or something, maybe even week nine, and we're talking about the next quarter and asking the students what they'd like to read. They suggested all kinds of books and we hadn't even ordered them. You can't do that now. You have to order way in advance, and you have to know. And you can't ask the students now. They don't know anything to suggest, but then, they did, and they enjoyed being part of the process.

Taylor: But I don't think people are coming to college for that reason anymore. If you look across the country, the liberal arts colleges, except for the really prestigious ones, are having a lot of trouble. They're closing down. STEM is ruling the day.

Fiksdal: Yes.

Taylor: And vocational, and you've got to say what kind of job. Tuition has gone up so much that you have to be really focused.

Fiksdal: It's just sad, because humanities is not considered very important. They never replaced retiring faculty. We needed to have three faculty members in each language to really make language learning accessible, just to teach every two years in that language, so you'd have something for the more advanced students. Now, you just will teach it every other year, and then there's nothing except first and second year. I mean, this is just ridiculous. The whole system has been—

Taylor: The language offerings have gone down.

Fiksdal: At first, it was fabulous. We got students at all levels. But in the '90s, we started getting students who were really just beginning, first and second year. And now, nobody has any training. They get into college, I don't know how.

Taylor: They still have to have two years of language, I think,

Fiksdal: Yeah, but somehow they come in a different way.

Taylor: Language programs is one problem, but even more general humanities . . .

Fiksdal: If you don't replace people—I remember once you came into a meeting. We were all on the DTF to decide who the next hires would be. And, you know, that's just a horrible DTF to be on. People cry. Everybody's desperate. Desperate. And then there's Barbara who says, "If you don't hire mm mm mm, then" . . . and I had to carry that message. One time you sailed in—you never came except one time—and you looked at the list and you said, "There's no philosophy. You can't have a liberal arts college without a philosopher."

Taylor: I said that?

Fiksdal: Yeah. And then you just looked at everyone and waltzed out. And we put up philosophy. It was the most effective thing I've ever seen. No one had managed that yet. [laughter] You didn't even take your coat off. You just kind of came in—

Taylor: I don't remember that at all, but that's funny.

Fiksdal: It was really great.

Taylor: I'm surprised it would have been philosophy. But the University of Washington right now—I think I told you on the phone last night—it used to have 45 members of the history department, and now their goal is to get down to 25 because there are just no students wanting to study history. But the 25 are random, because it depends on who retires. So instead of having a range of history—you could have a history department of 25 without an American historian.

Fiksdal: Sure.

Taylor: It wouldn't do as well, but you could have that. But four or five American historians have retired, so they have one left. So the major university of the state has nobody teaching American history.

Fiksdal: Yeah, it sort of reminds you of Evergreen.

Taylor: Yeah. But at Evergreen what happens is—we've always fought this. People say, "Students want X and so we ought to get more business people." There was a cry for psychology since day one, and we used to say, "We could hire 20 psychologists and still not satisfy the students."

Fiksdal: That's right. It would never be enough.

Taylor: But they're responding to that a bit now because they're desperate.

Fiksdal: Yeah, they're desperate.

Taylor: So they are hiring psychologists because they think they'll get students.

Fiksdal: The faculty have gone through this process for the last two years of creating these paths.

Taylor: Pathways, yeah, it's a new word.

Fiksdal: It's a new word but it's not a new concept.

Taylor: No.

Fiksdal: It's been there for a long time. But the idea is a little bit complex. You've got to have enough faculty to make sure the students can go through four years. Now, this is a lot of faculty who are doing other things, possibly. So not only is it a question of levels, it's a question of interdisciplinarity, it's a question of all these things. So if you don't have people sign up to support that path, you don't have a path.

Taylor: The other problem traditionally is faculty have taught what they wanted to teach. It was only out of the goodness of their hearts that we would try to get people to say, "Okay, I'll teach first-year students this year," or, "I'll do my share in teaching something."

Fiksdal: And it didn't happen, and Tom Womeldorff had to create a rule, so now it's in the handbook, that you have to teach first-year students every certain period of time.

Taylor: But people don't.

Fiksdal: Well, the deans go after them. But you don't want someone who doesn't want to do it and do it right.

Taylor: That's true. But the other thing is that someone that could be teaching—you've always had collaboration among the language teachers. They have said, "Okay, I'll do the French this year." But in a lot of other cases, it's not there. They'll say, "Oh, I'd rather do photography this year," or, "I'd rather do something." So they'll do something very odd, and physics won't be taught.

Fiksdal: Exactly.

Taylor: With the sciences, they were more organized, but—

Fiksdal: I think sciences and languages were the only—because they are the two areas where you have to go developmentally.

Taylor: Yes.

Fiksdal: Step by step. That's the way it is. There's no other way. With a lot of humanities—with literature—let's face it. Everybody in literature, everyone in history, everyone in philosophy, what do we do? We mostly teach reading and writing, and analysis through all that.

Taylor: And you don't have—

Fiksdal: We do it over and over. And some students are more advanced, but you always have people at the low level.

Taylor: That's the service. But if you don't have humanities teachers, then nobody's doing it. The idea of Writing Across the Curriculum is still very powerful, but I don't know that it's happening.

Fiksdal: No, I don't think so. A lot of initiatives, they never happened well. I mean, every once in a while, we got a burst of energy, and remembered and started doing it. That's our problem at Evergreen. We don't have longstanding deans or longstanding provosts, so people forget, or have other agendas.

Taylor: It sounds like they're getting more proscribed in what people are asked to teach.

Fiksdal: I'm not against that.

Taylor: I'm not against that either.

Fiksdal: From the very beginning, I always have thought that people should not be allowed to do whatever they want. You take someone like Kirk Thompson. He was hired as a photographer, and he becomes a psychologist and thinks he's smarter than everyone else. It helps to be trained somewhat, as I found out when I went to graduate school. Linguistics is partially humanities and partly social sciences, so there are some people—I did qualitative work, but I have colleagues that do quantitative, so there are all these differences and you have to be able to read and understand the papers.

I was stunned when I realized you should have a research agenda, and that you need to develop it. It was just a whole new world to me. And I think having that experience was really good, because I understood much more about when students really wanted to go on, I could help them.

Taylor: If someone were to ask you—sincerely, not just conversationally— “Okay, given the situation that Evergreen is in now, what would you advise? Would you advise trying to patch it up, or would you advise trying to start from scratch? What would you advise?”

Fiksdal: I can't abandon the dream. I would advise going back over values that everyone has now. What values have lasted? Do people believe in collaborative learning? Do people believe in team teaching? Do people believe that students are learning with these methods and these ideals that we've always had that we helped create?

If they don't, that's one thing. But if they do, then we have to make it work better. And I think the Pathways are a way to show students how to make their way through the curriculum. We get students now who've been told what to do their whole lives. They're in clubs, they're busy with all these things, people telling them what to do, and training in sports and training in music, or love of videogames, or whatever it happens to be. So they are not focused on academics, like we were. They're just different people.

Taylor: The world is different from 50 years ago. It's changed.

Fiksdal: The world is different, radically.

Taylor: What was designed at the time was appropriate and exciting, and maybe not appropriate and exciting now.

Fiksdal: But I think it is appropriate and exciting now. What I think they should do is hire some of us to go off to other colleges where this is being done, where interdisciplinary studies are being done. It's everywhere now. Go and see how they're doing it, and come back and set some really hard questions for the faculty and the administration to examine. We finally did that in the long-range curriculum committee. I was on that DTF the year I left. It was only two quarters, but still, we looked at Web sites from other colleges. Brown University is a very prestigious place. Do they have requirements? No. You can take anything you want. How did they get to be so cool?

Taylor: It's partly because they have the reputation.

Fiksdal: Well, we used to have a reputation.

Taylor: But we've never turned down students.

Fiksdal: Well, people argue for the public nature of the college, and that's very true. I think we need to change that. I think we have to have standards, and we have to have more rigor. We can't just take students who really should be in high school still.

Taylor: That's an old argument, too.

Fiksdal: You can have intensive classes for a couple of weeks before school starts to do a lot of things. Remember, when we were deans, there was this big argument, or question, about whether you could teach algebra. It turns out, you can't really teach it in college for credit. We found that out—I think you did—and we had to work around it, because some students have to have algebra. So you just somehow pay someone to teach them.

Taylor: But I sometimes wonder, if you could get together a group of people that were really excited about planning something new, you start with the students that you have. In 2019, there are different students than there were, so you design something that's going to work for students that have no college experience, students that aren't so prepared, a world that is very technological, and then you try to design something. Because what we were designing in 1970 was change, freedom . . .

Fiksdal: But look at all those ideas. The idea that you could have an internship and it would be worth credit. We could do so much with that now.

Taylor: Absolutely.

Fiksdal: Students don't even know what jobs are out there. Who does? But you could do so much with that.

Taylor: Other schools are doing that.

Fiksdal: We could do more with internships, we could do more PLE, Prior Learning from Experience, we could do all these old ideas. They just need to be hauled out and really examined. Instead of being peripheral, they could be central. Every student will have at least two internships, something like that. If they decide they really need to do X, what are they lacking? And then there are ways to do it, both part-time and full-time. I think there are ways. Everybody says students are more vocationally focused. Well, make it vocationally focused then.

Taylor: Yeah. And the other thing that they have done is put this big focus on equity, which I think is right. You have to have that as a given.

Fiksdal: And as a value, so when you graduate, you have this to offer. You, as a student, know how to be inclusive, you know much more about how to work with differences. All these things are in our values.

Taylor: They are.

Fiksdal: It's just looking at them again, and deciding if they really still matter, and if so, how you talk about it, how you highlight those things, and what really matters. I just believe that a lot of the ideas are ideas that are still valid and important today. Collaborative learning is still super-important. Any meeting you go to, all of your skills come into play.

But I would hate to see it fail, like close and become a branch of the University of Washington, and then they would win. [laughing] The behemoth.

Taylor: That's true. I don't think that's going to happen. That's what's happening to Hampshire College in Massachusetts. They can't seem to make it, and if they're taken over by the University of Massachusetts, then they'll just be a branch.

Fiksdal: But if you go to Hampshire, you have access to Amherst and all these other private colleges. Why bother going to Hampshire? You might as well go to those other colleges.

Taylor: That's right. They're not getting students.

Fiksdal: Maybe that's part of it, too. Anything different is not . . .

Taylor: Right now, it's all driven by economics.

Fiksdal: Yeah. Did you read in the paper for a few days now, they've had references to this article that came out, "Camp for Capitalists"? Children's camp. Learning to be a capitalist. I just thought, oh, my goodness. It's propaganda, and everything is propaganda. You can argue you're sending kids—any kind of church camp or anything it's all propaganda. But on the other hand, well, if you want kids to be critical thinkers, I'm not sure, you have to have some counter-balance there.

Taylor: Well, I'll have the propaganda about equality/inequality. I'll go for that propaganda. I think our country depends on that one.

Fiksdal: And that might be just the kind of thing to say that you're centered on.

Taylor: Yeah. And I think the college might be headed in that direction. It's a little odd in Olympia, because we're not a very diverse community, but I think that's the direction the college wants to go.

Fiksdal: It sure has gotten more diverse, though. I grew up here, so it's much more diverse now. My daughter, Mara, said that in Renton, minority cultures are in the majority in Renton.

Taylor: I bet that's true.

Fiksdal: She's on the Planning Commission now, which is a volunteer job. In this city, it's a paid job, but there, you can volunteer to be on it. And she tried for it and got accepted, and she looked around and everybody is white, middle-class.

Taylor: Everybody is white?

Fiksdal: Everybody on that council. You can go into any store, you feel like you're a minority. You go to any business, you go to any club—because she goes a lot to these clubs to try to get volunteers for things—you understand. The structure of the council is incorrect. And that might be at Evergreen, too; the structure might be incorrect.

Taylor: Yeah.

Fiksdal: But that's my feeling. I just feel like, don't give up. The college should be using the retired faculty more, even those of us in our seventies. We can still think and do things, and I think we still have energy, and a lot of love for the college because we helped create it. We want it to continue, if it can. But I do believe in innovation. I believe in change, and I think the college can and should do that.

Taylor: Okay, shall we quit at this point?

Fiksdal: Absolutely.