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Interview with Jim Johnston

Jim Johnston

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #214
JOHNSTON, Jim**

JOHNSTON, Jim

Chair and Professor of Biology, Faculty Conference Chair, President of Eagle Club

At Winthrop: 1983-2011

Interviewed: March 24, 2015

Interviewer: Rebecca Masters

Index by: Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard and Rebecca Masters

Length: 01:10:48

Abstract: In his March 24, 2015 interview with Rebecca Masters, Jim Johnston details his time at Winthrop from 1983-2011 as a faculty filling several roles. Johnston also reveals the evolution of the sciences at Winthrop, his election as Chair of Faculty Conference and growth of athletics at Winthrop. In particular, Johnston recalls a mid-1990s vote of no confidence in the president and how Winthrop faculty responded. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Winthrop History, Faculty Conference, Vote of No Confidence, Presidents, budgets, biology, athletics, Eagle Club

Interview Session (March 24, 2015): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:00:20 Question: Roles at Winthrop and years? Answer: Came to Winthrop December 1982 as Assistant Professor of Biology – job officially started in August 1983. Came from Maryville College in Tennessee. Promoted to Associate Professor in 1986/1987. Promoted to Professor in 1993. In 1993 was asked to be the Director of Graduate Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences. In 2000, elected to Chair of Faculty Conference. Melford Wilson asked JJ to be Acting Associate Vice President for Graduate and Continuing Studies around 2001. JJ talks about 9/11. In 2003, appointed Chair of Biology Department from 2002-2011. Retired in 2011.

00:03:45 Question: What were Winthrop's greatest strengths/weaknesses when you came to Winthrop? Answer: JJ recalls his interview at Winthrop in 1982 – remembers being

- asked how he would handle the students. JJ got the perception that the students were “weak” – refers to SAT scores, open enrollment. Facilities were a weakness, especially for the Sciences. Open Houses for freshman, JJ was not thrilled with the facilities. There was a big push to get a new science building. JJ like the comradery. JJ said everyone was willing to mentor him.
- 00:08:10 *Question:* How would you compare Winthrop of today to Winthrop of the 1980s? *Answer:* There is no comparison. The sciences at Winthrop are the best in the state among public universities and some private. Says Winthrop is equal to Davidson.
- 00:09:18 *Question:* First impressions of DiGiorgio? *Answer:* JJ thought he had a plan, had done his homework. Plan to grow class and academic credentials. Even in later years, he had a plan. Vote of No Confidence – JJ voted no. Not everybody voted. The perception was that DiGiorgio would not communicate his plan amidst some faculty discontent.
- 00:11:15 *Question:* Other challenges? *Answer:* Dwindling State support. Raised student tuition. Fundraising. Had a very successful capital campaign.
- 00:12:40 *Question:* How has Winthrop’s reputation changed? *Answer:* JJ spoke of reputation of Winthrop amongst faculty . When JJ arrived, there was little research in Biology, now it’s different. Expectations of faculty are much different than they were before, at least in the sciences, tremendously better. In JJ’s last three years, thirteen undergraduate students were sent right into PhD programs at Harvard, Duke, Chapel Hill, etc. In 1983, none of the students were going into biological research.
- 00:16:30 *Question:* Perception of politics? *Answer:* Not political-- JJ didn’t pay a lot of attention to legislators. JJ looked to DiGiorgio for advice on how to present to the legislature. Legislators disingenuous. Benchmark performances.
- 00:19:05 *Question:* Does Winthrop’s historic beginnings hurt or help its contemporary reputation? *Answer:* Probably hurts. JJ speculates that Winthrop still has a reputation of being a woman’s college. Rebranding.
- 00:20:15 *Question:* How were the sciences treated at Winthrop and how did that evolve? *Answer:* When JJ arrived, Phil Lader came at the same time. JJ didn’t pay much attention to Lader’s take on the sciences. JJ talks about the Interim President before DiGiorgio, and that’s when JJ realized the importance of having a President that was invested in the sciences. DiGiorgio convinced the State Legislature to approve of a new science building, JJ talks about the progression of getting a new science building. Dalton Hall and Sims renovation.
- 00:24:15 *Question:* How were Winthrop’s visual and performing arts viewed across the state?

- Answer:* JJ not sure. JJ speculates that Winthrop had a good reputation in the arts, music, performing arts, etc. JJ not sure how the legislature viewed this.
- 00:25:45 *Question:* Did faculty discuss performance funding system? *Answer:* Not discussed by faculty. People knew what the performance funding indicators were. Since the Biology department didn't have any bad marks, it was not discussed. There was a comment about retention/graduate rates. Biology department responded appropriately.
- 00:28:15 *Question:* From faculty perspective, what were main issues leading to vote of no confidence? *Answer:* JJ speculates about the relationship between Jason Silverman and DiGiorgio. Didn't communicate well. Jason Silverman was chair of Faculty Conference. Arrogant. JJ speculates what Silverman wanted- thought DiGiorgio was "bricks and mortar guy." Fretwell report sided somewhat with Silverman. JJ talks about the voting process. JJ voted no. There weren't a lot of people speaking on DiGiorgio's behalf. Science faculty was divided. Of 400-500 eligible, 180-200 in the auditorium to vote.
- 00:32:05 *Question:* What was the sentiment among faculty after the vote? *Answer:* There were still negative feelings in 2000. Mostly in humanities. Naysayers were surprised that DiGiorgio stayed. JJ talks about Tom Moore and how he helped ease tensions; saw a bigger picture. JJ speculates about how and why DiGiorgio used foundation money for additional fundraising.
- 00:35:38 *Question:* How were you elected to Faculty Conference? *Answer:* Marilyn Sarow suggested JJ submit his name. Doesn't know why. JJ didn't think much about it initially. JJ remembers his speech. JJ did not have a big agenda.
- 00:38:45 *Question:* What did you learn as a representative of the Board? *Answer:* There is a lot of work; you have to do your homework. JJ describes what he did as a faculty representative. End of the year review from the Board – JJ conducted a full faculty survey that caused trouble. Same 30% with negative comments.
- 00:43:25 *Question:* What happened in the next two years? *Answer:* That summer, DiGiorgio and JJ worked with Rock Hill School District, because the school district wanted the Winthrop Farm. JJ knew the science department wouldn't like that. DiGiorgio wanted JJ to defend the decision to not give up the farm to the Board. 75 years of data at stake. NCAA wouldn't allow shared facilities. Board voted not to give up farm. JJ wanted to push undergraduate research – DiGiorgio proposed increase of money for research council. JJ speculates that faculty opinion started to turn because of this. Allowing students as co-investigators.
- 00:47:30 *Question:* When did money start going into salaries? *Answer:* JJ doesn't recall. Raises

were merit based at one point. Faculty seemed to like that.

- 00:49:35 *Question:* Concern about the recession? *Answer:* Contingency plans made. There were some cuts, but nothing like they thought would happen. Furlough days. People were willing to take pay cuts to avoid layoffs of colleagues.
- 00:52:20 *Question:* What does that say about Winthrop? *Answer:* At least we were asked about what to do with our budget. Students were not affected much – some graduate assistantships were cut. Undergraduate students – JJ does not recall.
- 00:54:40 *Question:* What made you get involved in Winthrop athletics? *Answer:* Involved for students. JJ had tremendous student athletes. JJ's wife was chairman of the Eagle Club. JJ still keeps in contact with some of his students.
- 00:57:55 *Question:* Creating a football team at Winthrop? *Answer:* JJ hasn't heard much from the community. JJ's personal opinion is that he doesn't want it to happen. JJ hopes to see a growth in academic programs and increase in enrollment. JJ makes suggestions for Dan Mahony.
- 01:02:40 *Question:* Any interactions with Comstock? *Answer:* Yes. JJ invited her to the Eagle Club. Met with her to plan events and raise money. JJ talks about Comstock's behavior and how it may have had to do with her mother's illness. Comstock did not want any Clemson memorabilia, etc. No involvement with her athletically.
- 01:05:15 *Question:* What do you expect from the next President? *Answer:* Unanimous support for Mahony. JJ met all of the candidates. Mahony called JJ to follow up.
- 01:07:30 *Question:* How would history view the DiGiorgio Administration? *Answer:* Winthrop is better off for having DiGiorgio. Tony made it happen. Winthrop has the best undergraduate education in South Carolina.
- 01:09:10 *Question:* Any other events, experiences to share? *Answer:* Improvements to athletic facilities – track, Coliseum, creation of University College, undergraduate capacities.
- 01:10:46 *End of interview*