

Lee Miringoff

Marist College

Poughkeepsie, New York

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For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

Miringoff, Lee, 27 July 2009 Part 2

Transcript – Dr. Lee Miringoff (Part 2)

Interviewee: Lee Miringoff

Interviewer: Gus Nolan

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Subject Headings:

- Dr. Miringoff, Lee
- Marist College Faculty
- Marist College Board of Trustees
- Marist College History
- Marist College (Poughkeepsie, New York)
- Marist College Social Aspects

Summary: Dr. Lee Miringoff talks to Gus Nolan about the aspects of polling, such as the sample size, revenue sources, media distribution, questionnaires and pollsters. He discusses the current state of polling in the United States and of other polling organizations. He talks about the state of Marist alumni, the future development of Marist from 2009, and finally what he would recommend the Marist Board of Trustees.

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[00:08](#) **GN:** Today is Monday, July 27th. We're having our Part 2 interview with Lee Miringoff, the Director of Marist Public Opinion Institute. Good afternoon, Lee.

[00:22](#) **LM:** How you doing, Gus? Good to be back.

[00:24](#) **GN:** Lee, I want to pick it up at the idea of kind of an anatomy of a poll. Where does the idea come from? What's the size of the sample? Who does the questionnaire? Who are the pollsters? The analyses? the distribution? Ok so we'll take it step by step.

[00:40](#) **LM:** Well I think. Certainly one of the things that we are interested is to you know, track trends. So on our polls, you know if we've asked something the likelihood is we, you know, might do it again and to show changes in numbers.

[00:58](#) **GN:** Let's just hold it right there. Track trends in? Our universe?

[01:05](#) **LM:** Okay, an approval rating. A question about the right direction or wrong direction. How someone's handling something.

[01:16](#) **GN:** Ok. But the topic can be on a political, religious, social?

[01:21](#) **LM:** We cover a wide gamut of issues. So we really want to be a one stop shop so for the public and the media, the opportunity to find political information. New York City, New York State, the nation, in the presidential election, we did a lot of the battleground states. So that would be one world. In another world, we might delve into as the world of economics obviously, very important today. Healthcare, education, technology lifestyles. People are always interested in questions about sports so we do that. Most of the questions we ask on lifestyle topics tend to have a public policy focus so if we're doing something about baseball, we might ask about drug testing of athletes. Are ticket prices and do fans feel they're getting their money's worth. It tends not to be about Derek Jeter although that may be part of the motivation. So what we do is we do polls on a variety of topics and then we might as I say track a trend if we've been doing something repetitively over time. And that would be something that would presumably have added a zing to it.

[02:39](#) **GN:** But the trend really doesn't get into fashion, does it?

[02:43](#) **LM:** We've done fashion statements. You know. Polls on topics. I mean you know our website documents all kinds of... We've done, oh gosh. Accessories that people wear, blue jeans. We cover the gamut

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really. You know. I mean. Some of the stuff is really focused to specialty publications so any fashion magazines might be more interest to us. Our bread and butter is the political and the economic and healthcare and I think those tend to be the topics that we are more identified with and clearly, we do with greater regularity.

03:24 **GN:** How size is your typical sample.

03:27 **LM:** Well that varies depending on whether it's an election and we have to be accountable for a specific accurate number. If we do a poll on Monday and the elections on Tuesday, it's much harder to explain a disparity in the outcome than it is if you're doing a poll on whether people who have had enhancement, performance-enhancing drugs or they should be put into the hall of fame or not. Well there's no election on that. There's no referendum. So you don't have to necessarily worry as much so. If we do a survey in the way the statistics work, clearly you know the error margin shrinks but very gradually, as you get to a certain threshold so you can do five or six hundred interviews. You might do a thousand. Sometimes we go as high as two thousand if we really want to know about subgroups in the population. So if I want to know whether Governor Patterson in New York has an appeal with African American voters, well I might do a larger sample because I need to get more of them in the sample than I might if I just did six or seven hundred.

04:42 **GN:** How would you guarantee diversity?

04:45 **LM:** Well it's still random selection. We can oversample as a specific group. That's one way of doing it. Where you'd just literally screen and after let's say, you've done a thousand interviews. You say, "Well, we want to know what Catholics think on this topic." And then we might screen only for Catholics to create an over-sample. Or we might just do another five hundred or six hundred interviews knowing that we might get another one hundred fifty or two hundred Catholics. Just based on random probability. So there's a lot of ways of doing these things and you really customize it to the needs of the particular poll and the demands for accuracy and the need to do some group analysis. We jokingly say that we never have two polls that look alike in terms of the reasons that we're going and we always seem to have a very customized, an individualized project.

[05:36](#) **GN:** Are your polls always by phone?

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[05:41](#) **LM:** No we do primarily phone and phone interviewing is still the gold standard. We do however, do polls that are not only landline phones but cell phones. We do internet polling on a topic on a population where the internet would be a good way of doing it. So if I was doing a survey, let's say, of college presidents, well they're all probably going to have you know, email address. It doesn't work as well for the general population where you're missing. People who don't have or are not online. We also have an interactive voice recorded system which we integrate with our phone system so that some people want the privacy of not talking to a real person and for those people we want to make it available, they can do the poll on internet. And voice recording. So in a sense we have a variety, we call it, mixed mode interviewing. Many different ways of reaching the public.

[06:47](#) **GN:** Is U.S. mail passé?

[06:49](#) **LM:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. Because well, first of all it's very slow. The response rate is abysmal. There's no [...]

06:55 **GN:** The expense is extraordinary.

06:58 **LM:** There's no opportunity to clarify anything. One of the nice things about talking to a trained interviewer is that if you have a question, you can ask the question. So we don't get lost there. Mail surveys are useful for those groups who don't have an alternative. Not everybody has a survey room.

[07:17](#) **GN:** Are there a typical sampling of questions? Do they go from one to ten or?

[07:23](#) **LM:** Well the surveys tend to have a variety of topics. Well, it's sort of like we have a turkey dinner. And we make a turkey sandwich. Then we make turkey salad then we make turkey soup. So we get a lot out of each survey. So we have our general questions., political questions, some economic questions. Might have some lifestyle questions. Of course the demography in every survey as well.

[07:45](#) **GN:** Are you or Barb, the chief scrutinizers of the questionnaires? \

[07:48](#) **LM:** I think so but we have a professional staff who also are. We have one person who's a survey methodologist. We have a person who is involved more in the media distribution side of communications and web development. Barbara Carvalho and I are most likely to be the architects. But we have much more help than we had in the infancy of the institute.

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[08:14](#) **GN:** How many pollsters do you have?

[08:16](#) **LM:** We have about two hundred to two hundred fifty in any given year. Undergraduates who would be doing the interviewing or be doing supervising. The juniors and seniors very often are our supervisors where they monitor and provide feedback for the other interviewers. But I would say we have a Monday crew and a Tuesday crew, and a Wednesday crew and a Thursday crew and. You know we have a very, very well-organized at this point

[08:46](#) **GN:** Is there a specific training session for each poll?

[08:49](#) **LM:** Well there's a briefing on each poll. All the interviewers are trained at the beginning of the semester when they become interviewers. They go through a lengthy training process. Every phone session, you are briefed on the specific questionnaire. So the students get that as well and then they're monitored and provided feedback.

[09:14](#) **GN:** And the analysis of the poll?

[09:16](#) **LM:** Well again that's you know more of a staff function. And we're responsible largely for that. People are involved in the weighting of the data, the coding of the data, other et cetera. You know in many ways they prepare the data for us.

[09:36](#) **GN:** There's always human input. It's not just computers run?

[09:39](#) **LM:** Oh no, no totally. There's a whole interpretive side which... You know the computers are there to facilitate and set the table. But the chef has to show up and figure out how to cook the meal.

[09:51](#) **GN:** Okay. And the distribution of the results?

[09:53](#) **LM:** I must be hungry a lot of food analogies tonight. Distribution results. Right now is so much different than it was

10:01 **GN:** Ten years ago...

10:03 **LM:** No, three years ago even. I mean you know there wasn't too long ago that we had them copied in the copy machine and mailed the results. Copy room. Now we are everything takes place in info space and you know the results literally can be available for the eleven o'clock news from a poll we might do from 5:30 to 9 o'clock at night. And then mostly results now are e-mailed very often the next morning. Or if it's not a time-

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bound a project, we might sprinkle it out over the next, let's say, two or three days. So that you have news pegs that might work better with certain data.

[10:44](#) **GN:** So are all polling information free? Or is there a fee for it?

[10:52](#) **LM:** The information that people see in the papers you know Marist Poll finds something. Those are. Those are not charged.

10:58 **GN:** No fee for that.

10:59 **LM:** No fee for that. That's available to the public, the media and any interested people. We do have a revenue-generating side of our life where we get calls very often from individuals or organizations or not-for-profit groups. You know I'd like to have a poll done. Now we won't do anything for a political candidate and we won't do anything for a political party because we want to maintain that journalistic distance but you know it's very nice to have a revenue side to this and contribute back to the college to offset some of the costs of our public polls. We're very involved. I mean we do a lot of projects. We've done work for lots of organizations over the years. Locally the local hospitals. We've worked for the Children's Health Fund in New York City, I.B.M, the Knights of Columbus, a variety of organizations, the Dyson Foundation. Lots of different groups on a variety of topics. And that's a different relationship. They're paying. We will develop the questionnaire. We'll do everything. There's certain criteria as to how they can release and we're members of the National Council on Public Polls. So people aren't allowed just to pick and choose the, you know half-willed result.

[12:15](#) **GN:** I was going to say. Do they have a chance to review the questions per se?

[12:20](#) **LM:** Sure. If you hire me to do a survey, that's a different relationship than I might just put together on my own. So if you hire me to do the survey then, you know we will not do any loaded questions. The questions have to be good and have to be balanced and all the rules of question apply. But you know the data in a sense, becomes yours and you know, you're not bound to release it all. If you release anything on any question, you're bound to release all the information on that question. You can't... you can't pick and choose. And just show that your organization is ahead of the three organizations and skip the fact that two are more popular than yours.

[13:06](#) **GN:** The future of polling. Now what would you say about ... its users though that there is a dramatic

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increase in people's interests. Almost on all levels. Would you agree with that?

[13:19](#) **LM:** Oh sure, I mean there's been a huge proliferation in the industry. Both in the market research sense and in the electoral world and in the public polling that we do.

[13:30](#) **GN:** Polling now is actually making the news rather than just reporting it.

[13:36](#) **LM:** Oh sure. You know the networks. Oh you know they have their own polls and fortunately, they still take independent polls. But clearly, they're very interested. You know CNN is likely to trumpet their results before they trumpet someone else's.

[13:52](#) **GN:** An interesting point now. Is there been an increase in professional polling organizations?

[13:59](#) **LM:** I would say yes. Although they're not. The quality does get a little diluted over time if you have. I mean it's much easier now to enter this arena. You don't have to have a huge phoning center and frankly you can outsource the interviewing and not have a phoning center at all if you want. So there are many more organizations able to do survey research. I don't have the count but they certainly have grown at the college level. That's grown in the in the public relations, market research world as well. Political communications and consultants and that world. So it's been a lot of expansion.

[14:39](#) **GN:** You mention some of the media are developing their own polls.

[14:43](#) **LM:** Although they tend to have their own polls but they tend not to have their polling units. In other words, they tend to farm out to have a company actually do their interviewing. So for example, CBS is the only network I believe that still does its own survey collection. But N.B.C. A.B.C. C.N.N. Fox. They farm it out. Yeah. They farmed out. You'll see the results of an A.B.C poll that doesn't. Don't think there is necessarily a phone room at ABC where that data is being collected doesn't make it right or wrong. It's just something that surprises people when they learn that the polling unit at a network is not this massive organization. Now...

[15:29](#) **GN:** If you say that in NBC and New York Times Poll, would that be something they did themselves or have someone do?

[15:37](#) **LM:** C.B.S pairs with the New York Times and C.B.S actually has its own phoning center. And that's the only one. Now sometimes The Times will rely on that and partner with that with C.B.S. And other times they just farm it out and they get it done themselves. There is no phone room at The New York Times to my

knowledge.

[15:58](#) **GN:** Moving on to another area. Have you seen an increase in the education of people in public opinion polling? Are there more courses being given on polling?

[16:16](#) **LM:** That's interesting question I think generally public opinion has been a growth area. Both in communication courses and in political science. I'm not sure. I mean there have been Masters degrees, programs some of which have come and gone. Unfortunately some of the more state-funded efforts with the budget crunch that exists at the state level where these people are in Connecticut with Roper Center, UConn Poll, Rutgers, Eagleton Institute. These have gone into hard financial times. The budgets are tighter at the university-level and some of those...

[16:59](#) **GN:** So there's no Roper Poll anymore?

[17:02](#) **LM:** No, there is a Roper Center which archives data. There's no poll coming out of that organization at this point. They used to have one. For many years, a lot of our students went there to get their master's degree. And you know it's unfortunate but that's sort of the budget axe has fallen and hasn't really spared anybody in this regard. So there's a nice program at the University of Maryland. Gallup is connected with the program I believe at the University of Nebraska. So there are places to study public opinion per se. And certainly at the undergraduate level, there are many, many courses. Obviously here at Marist.

[17:39](#) **GN:** Is Gallup lost some of its prominence in its field?

[17:42](#) **LM:** Well. I would say that the name is still the gold standard. Because like other things it's sort of the adjective so the Gallup Poll is synonymous with polling. And there are... you know when you see the Gallup Poll, you know in tandem with let's say, USA Today who they polled very often for. Most of the Gallup polls that are also for corporate entities. The big money is in the market research in the corporate realm. And that's really where Gallup is involved in so if you're a head of a major corporation, you're paid top dollar and perhaps even more eagerly in a different economic climate for a Gallup Poll. And partly why we do well on our revenue side is because in New York certainly. Elsewhere but definitely in New York. You know. A Marist Poll attracts attention.

[18:36](#) **GN:** Do you see a role of Marist to developing an education program in polling?

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[18:42](#) **LM:** Well you know. It's something we've talked about over the years. We do have a concentration at the undergraduate level in polling and survey research and public opinion. To really develop we would have to go to the masters level and that's becomes a whole different resource. You know other. People don't. It's kind of sad but people don't necessarily think of a career in survey research. But they tend to be very good and our students who went through the UConn program and went into market research. Well, almost without fail, without exception have done really, really well. So they have been great careers. But people if you're you know a junior in college, you don't necessarily think, gee I want to become a pollster.

[19:32](#) **GN:** It's not a career.

[19:33](#) **LM:** It's not. It doesn't have the identification. Some of our students have learned along the way that this can be very, very beneficial to them and we have a lot who are out there doing just that.

[19:46](#) **GN:** Coming back to Marist and the economy. Do you see gloom in the future or do you think the worst passed in terms of our dealing with the present crisis?

[20:02](#) **LM:** Well I think things are generally starting to pass. You know it's sort of like when I walked over here and it was very overcast and across the river, you could see a glimmer of the blue sky returning. So I think that certainly out there in the you know. Marist college is really, really an exceptional place and I mean that in both uses it's exceptionally good. And it's also against the current because we were relatively young. And we've grown so well and the physical plant and the programs available to students here are so ample that, you know, the best advertisement for Marist are Marist alums, you know who are out there almost without fail, speaking highly of the college. When we started doing this Marist Poll and started going around, you know, shopping our wares really in the early 1980s, even though we polled in the late seventies, people didn't know Marist. They didn't know from Poughkeepsie, New York. And they certainly didn't know what a Miringoff was. Now over time, people just grow things. It's not just the poll obviously we're very visible. But there's so many walking live advertisement of what Marist is all about that the College just has blossomed. The poll obviously a part of that.

[21:33](#) **GN:** The ninety percent of our alumni graduated in the last ten years, I think. Something like that.

[21:38](#) **LM:** Something like that. And I run into them all the time. Yeah. Many of whom I know. Many of whom

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says I was in the original poll. Some are still in Marist. Some on our board of trustees. I mean it's a point of identification and reinforces what their education here was all about.

[21:52](#) **GN:** Very good. We really are coming down at the end of this so we're looking ahead and saying, what are your views on some of the things that might implement our or enhance our growth product? Do you see... If you had occasion to talk to the board, would you say, would you recommend one or two steps like this? Is there anything that comes to mind?

[22:19](#) **LM:** It's an interesting question. I think the only thing I would say, it's not really a direct answer to your question. But I would say and certainly they don't have to be told this because I think this has been very clear from the president's office and elsewhere. To keep on doing it. In other words I think the one thing Marist has always succeeded at, one way or another is the role of the dice is always come up good. And although it's hard sometimes. You know the Hancock Technology center. I mean it is hard to make that decision in the economic climate to move ahead with a new center but think of what it says about Marist college. And obviously not inexpensive but you know in some ways the cost of not doing it are greater in many ways. So I guess the answer to that is, you know, it gets back to your question about the economy and whether we've turned the corner. It's really nice I think that that decision to move ahead for example that building was in the tradition of being entrepreneurial that really has kept Marist the way it is and not to lose the community focus I think you know those are things that Marist has, you know, through the internships, through the abroad programs. You know there's so much that Marist has always typified in terms of innovation and education and the Marist Poll obviously being part of that too. But to have that, you know a unique educational brand which integrates technology into traditional values education I mean that's really what a contemporary definition of what a liberal arts education is all about. And that's what Marist has made, although the times have changed and the content of those change, the formula has remained the same. And I think you know to move away from that would be unwise. No one's arguing to do it. So don't have to get on my soapbox for too long and say you know. The formula has worked. So keep doing it. There's always needs to advance, I mean.

[24:37](#) **GN:** When you consider though I mean it's a thirty-five-million-dollar investment and not one student will be added to the campus. It would just give you more room to do what we should be doing.

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[24:46](#) **LM:** Yeah. So this is enhancement. And you know for anybody and I may have mentioned this earlier but we bring a lot of outside speakers onto campus. They've now heard of Marist. They know where Poughkeepsie is. Some of them have even stumbled across a Miringoff or a Carvalho along the way to bring them on to campus and see what this is all about here. From our phoning center. When we only bring them into the part... that is a professional-looking, professionally-run phoning center is the farthest thing from a bunch of students making a few phone calls and that's what you have to always be. You have to be ... the quality and the education of the students. The attention you get is just a wonderful side-benefit to what that's all about.

[25:40](#) **GN:** Good, well I think that pretty much wraps it up, Lee. Thank you very much.

[25:43](#) **LM:** I appreciate the opportunity and you know it's always nice to sort of reflect on all these things.