

Laurence Sullivan

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Marist College

Poughkeepsie, New York

Transcribed by Wai Yen Oo

For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections

Laurence Sullivan

Interviewee: Laurence Sullivan

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Marist College History

Marist College (Poughkeepsie, NY)

Marist College Faculty

Marist College Social History

Summary:

Laurence Sullivan discusses his tenure in Marist College as the Professor of Religious Studies. He reflects on the social history of Marist College and changes that happened on campus in the 1960s and the 1970s.

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Student ([23:13](#)):

An interview with assistant professor of Religious Studies at Marist College, Dr. Laurence Sullivan, excuse me. What initially brought you to Marist College and your first contact with the college?

L. Sullivan ([23:27](#)):

Well, that's really two very separated responses to that because there's a great chunk of time in-between my first contact with Marist College then coming here, you know, as a teacher. The first time I came here, it was not Marist College. It was St Ann's Hermitage. My cousin was a Brother here, and I came with my parents in 1936 to visit him. And that's a fair distance in the past. And my recollections of that event are certainly sketchy, but I remember being here. And so that was my initial contact, you know, through him. Later I became a Marist Brother myself, and came here then to study in 1951. And stayed here until I began my own teaching career in 1953. And then returned in 1967 to become part of the Religious Studies department.

Student ([24:53](#)):

Well, you're at Marist for the '67 on to present. What was your most memorable moment that you witnessed?

L. Sullivan ([25:04](#)):

My most memorable event [...].

Student ([25:06](#)):

Dealing with the college. Yes.

L. Sullivan ([25:08](#)):

Dealing with the college? Gee, there were very many memorable events. I guess, well, one that stands out in my mind, was the anti-Vietnam (War) protests of the late sixties and trying to get to my class in Donnelly for those few students who would show up because they were boycotting, you know, classes at the time. And it was a matter of stepping over students in the hallways. It was, you know, a very eventful time. It was sad in many ways because there was just a lot of turbulence going on, not only in the nation, but on the campus as well. People were very upset about things that were happening. So, you know, that surely was one event that stuck out in my mind. I guess the other was having been in a situation. You know, here where it was really a, a focus on all male students. And then that changed around 1969. And, you know, went into class and there were women in my classes. Up to that time, especially teaching the course that I do, which is now called Marriage and Family back then it was called Christian Marriage. But to get a discussion going, we'd bus the guys down to Mount St. Mary's in order to create, on occasion, a little discussion. So those, I guess, maybe are twin memorable events.

Student ([27:00](#)):

And for the social changes, you were here through three administrations, presidencies. Correct?

L. Sullivan ([27:06](#)):

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No, we've [...] Well, Linus Foy was president. Well, if the third administration was in my own time as a student, that's true.

Student ([27:15](#)):

Have you noticed a general trend of social change going through?

L. Sullivan ([27:18](#)):

Well, yes. I mean, in a view of the fact that when I was first here as a student, it was, you know, not only all-male, but all males with a vow of chastity. That certainly makes a difference. And then moving into a situation of Marist College, really as a four-year liberal arts school co-ed with a strong religious heritage and certainly that giving it some of the special identification. But, the transition then into just a co-ed school was quite significant.

Student ([28:01](#)):

Through the 50's and into the 60's was a very hectic. With the late 60's with as you said, Vietnam, and [...]

L. Sullivan ([28:09](#)):

Yes, I, I think that the college was really changing rapidly then not only in numbers, but also in [...] the way in which people went to school. I mean, going to school and co-ed classes and being in [...] Of course at the beginning, there weren't that many women. I think the first year, they were all living in the gatehouse, you know. The women, I mean. There was maybe a dozen living there and then a couple of others, maybe in some other part of the dorm. But as you know, eventually, it was. [...] They were even, maybe even a few more women than men.

Student ([28:48](#)):

What about the way the students reacted with the administration policies say, drinking. [...] I've heard stories where Marist was a little wild in the seventies [...] And how has it changed through the 80's?

L. Sullivan ([29:07](#)):

Well [...] I would guess perhaps that the people that are closer to the dorms would have a better perspective on this. In those early years when I was here and living in this very building because this was the residence for the student brother. So, I lived here and [...] the social life, obviously in the dormitory, did have [...] a focus, you know, around [...] the partying aspect and drinking aspect. And [...] going to the off-campus bars. I mean, the Brown Derby was a big gathering place then. Likewise, across the street, Frank's. Now it's Skinner's, but it was Frank's in those days. And a lot of students went there but I would never have described it as wild. [...] It seemed to be many times [...] with too heavy a focus on that. So that some might be spending more time in the partying mode than in the work mode. But that's still going on today. Even though, we have the benefit, if you will, of a drinking age now of, you know, a legal stipulation. Which I think supports, you know, the campus in some way. It gives us a hold. It's not just uniquely, you know the college position about drinking. It's supported by law. I think that's how but I think there has always been the tendency to make much of it. And it's always something to talk about with a lot more drama than going to class and doing assignments. So, you know, the fact of

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Marist being a party school and all that I don't believe it. Other than to say that, there's a lot of it that goes on but there's so much other educational benefit that students derive from it. And if you get them willing to talk about it, I think that they will say that it's going on.

Student ([31:19](#)):

Do you see the trend of student participation or attendance or the desire for knowledge is increasing or decreasing throughout the years?

L. Sullivan ([31:33](#)):

That's a really hard question to answer because I don't know that there has been really a, kind of a steady pattern of development that I've noticed. It's been kind of a fluctuating thing. I have, you know, a semester here or there that, you know, was significantly better than the one before. And then, and maybe it's only because my memory is so much better for this year and last year that I'm saying. I find it just so great now. Now I find students hard-working and participating. And yet there are pockets of them. Because maybe they'll take the class with their friends and they kind of [...] don't accept that challenge as well as they might have if they were kind of taking the class uniquely by themselves. But I think we've always had really good, hardworking, well-motivated students.

L. Sullivan ([32:41](#)):

They have always been in evidence to me over the years. That we may have a few more now. I think that's probably true. But that there's a marked difference between what we used to have now. Because I remember students back then that were very committed and, and very hard working. And we had wackos back then. But I think we have some now, too.

Student ([33:07](#)):

Okay. How do you see your role here at Marist changing? Like through the past years, when you started teaching here, is there a major change in your role involving the college?

L. Sullivan ([33:18](#)):

[...] I wouldn't see myself as having gone through a major transformation. I think the change that I perceive maybe has more of an administrative modification. That for me is more cosmetic than anything. Cause it hasn't really fundamentally changed my involvement but for many, many years. I was kind of an official part of the Marist College Counseling Center. And instead of a contract requiring my connection to the college in four individual courses, I had a commitment to three teaching courses. And a quarter of my time was available to students for counseling. I decided after a sabbatical three years ago, that I really wanted a four-course teaching load and therefore disconnected myself officially from the counseling center. And decided that I would be available to students, you know, pretty much on an ad-hoc basis as the occasion required by my contact through classes. Or even if some faculty member wanted to refer somebody to me for counseling. Because that has always been an important part of my teaching commitment, not just the classroom activity. But providing time over and above that, to work through issues with some students. Because the nature of my course in Marriage and Family and the nature of the course that I teach in morality, many of those issues I felt couldn't be handled in the classroom as such that I wanted to provide somebody with more time in another context. And so, when the semester

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would be over, maybe we would spend another semester or two working through something and I continued to do that. So, the change then has really been more in the official description rather than in anything that I did.

Student ([35:58](#)):

When you first began teaching here, do you remember like the goals of the administration and yourself? For what you wanted to accomplish?

L. Sullivan ([36:09](#)):

Well, the goals as I [...] would personally reflect or more articulate them for myself, you really were [...] to provide [...] the opportunity for students to have a real quality educational experience. And I think every faculty member felt, at least I did in terms of my classes that I would try to create a climate, which was an educational one, a challenging one. And one where the students felt respected and consequently would be motivated to really do good work.

Student ([37:04](#)):

Okay. This is sort of like a never lasting goal almost. You have to strive for that each and every year.

L. Sullivan ([37:11](#)):

[...] That's right. I mean it's a process. It's not an event that you kind of move toward. And of course, the other part of it, I mean, I think in order to kind of do all those things in a classroom. It really spells out the necessity for me, you know, to challenge myself and to continue to grow through the experience [...] with the students. Because I'm not just a kind of a bystander. I find myself really involved in the process, you know, with them and so I've had to continue to grow myself. And I think that, you know, my work at the college has allowed me to do that. And I, I think it's really been a privilege.

Student ([38:02](#)):

One of the biggest social organizations on the campus is probably the fraternity. And were you around when they started formulating and what was the feeling of the administration about them? And because I know there's a few administrators now or faculty that are not that supportive. And what was the overall tone or the, of the administration?

L. Sullivan ([38:26](#)):

Gee, it's not one of my more memorable events. I honestly [...] remember some of them. I can remember some of the students being involved with them, I guess I've never known that much about them. I think I have a recollection of some expressing (some faculty) expressing their concerns about it. You know, maybe fostering that party atmosphere or the drinking thing. But as far as I know, I don't know that [...] those groups have done any more than those that haven't identified themselves as a fraternity as such. You know, I had the sense of talking to individual students that the inclusion that they found in a fraternity provided them with a sense of support and that there was really a kind of a commitment they felt to the other people in it. And [...] I had the impression that they kind of benefited from it. I'm not aware frankly, of anybody that, you know, founded a disaster. Not that that couldn't have happened, but just that I don't know about.

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Student (39:35):

So, you see the formation as being beneficial more so than a detriment.

L. Sullivan (39:40):

Well, if [...] I could say that if I were allowed simply to use those few resources that I had. It's not something I honestly, that I've spent time looking at or studying or could kind of be knowledgeable about, I don't know really that much about them. I haven't really paid attention to it.

Student (40:01):

Okay. what do you see as Marist's biggest asset?

L. Sullivan (40:10):

[...] I think there were a lot. My initial kind of response if I was doing free association with, you know, students and faculty. I mean, I see those two elements. You know, interacting as really what happens here. [...] And I guess if you were to say, you know, make it one word, I think I would want to cover both the bases by talking about community. I think that's the asset that we have that Marist historically has committed itself to a communal kind of educational experience. It's a notion that consistently comes up, at least in fact faculty meetings that I go to one or another person in terms of whatever may be talked about. They'll talk about it in connection with the Marist community. Unfortunately, I guess, as it happens, it can be a catch phrase and a meaningless kind of term. And I'm hoping it wouldn't, that really would not have. I'd like to fight against that lip service to community. Because if we lose it, I think really that's our biggest asset. That faculty and student's kind of join together in this enterprise. And I think that includes all the other participants here. I mean, the staff and administration, I mean, everyone plays a really vital part. I think without that a kind of notion that we're all working toward the same thing and attempting to share the same quality experience. I really don't think we have much here.

Student (42:03):

And for the liability of Marist?

L. Sullivan (42:07):

The liability might be, the fact that, maybe [...] It's maybe [...] in all honesty [...] it's more of a concern to me. And again, maybe it's like a little bit like the fraternities. I'm not sure that I know all that much about it. I guess I'm really concerned. [...] I think it could be a serious problem for us eventually. If the students, since we are committed to a quality educational experience, I'm concerned maybe that too many students would not have the opportunity to be involved with full-time professors. I know there are many students who have many adjuncts and I'm sure these are very well-qualified people and have a lot to offer but because there may be, you know, not quite the consistency in their involvement here as hopefully we would have in full-time faculty that maybe some of the students would miss that kind of communal notion that I spoke about. Because I don't know how someone who may be just coming in for one course for one semester and not even perhaps coming back, would be part of that [...] kind of understanding [...] kind of spirit.

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L. Sullivan ([43:54](#)):

On the other hand, maybe if you have an adjunct who's here over the years with great consistency. [...] And that would be more hopeful, but that would be a liability to me. I think if because, and I realize that many of these [...] are really very necessary and unavoidable because of the economic situation. [...] We are trying to [...] provide the quality experience, keeping the lid on costs and [...] So adjunct professors become a way to do that. I mean, that's part of the real world. But I'm just concerned that you know, that we would not be doing that without real necessity.

Student ([44:37](#)):

Okay. You've been here for a while. And you've seen Marist grow [...]

L. Sullivan ([44:41](#)):

25 years this coming year.

Student ([44:42](#)):

25 years, this coming year. You've seen Marist grow physically with the buildings and the dorms. Has that played a major impact on the way administration enforces policies? Are they more strict dealing with more students or [...] is there a relation?

L. Sullivan ([45:00](#)):

Well, of course, as one might imagine, the more spread-out [...] the campus is the more need there would naturally be for some regulation. As for strictness and whatever, I've never really had the sense that people viewed the regulations as being strict. I think for the most part whatever has been and required has been in an effort to provide some reasonableness to people kind of [...] living in the close quarters in which they do perhaps in a dorm. But you know, other than that, I'm not so aware of policies that students would be [...] really negatively reacting to them.

Student ([46:02](#)):

Where do you see Marist going? What is Marist's number one goal right now?

L. Sullivan ([46:09](#)):

Well again, I hope that the number one goal continues to be what it really always has been to provide a real quality educational experience and anything that we can do in the future to enhance that I think is the direction that Marist ought to be going in. There's talk of, perhaps at least, among the students that they would like to see a new library. So, I mean, those kinds of developments, you know, surely would enhance the educational goal that we need to be about. The administration has talked about the priority of building some student housing. Again, because some of the students are living in such spread-out, you know, conditions that maybe they're cut off a little bit from the real life of the campus. And in that sense, maybe not enjoying the community as well as they might. And I don't see those priorities of dorm or library is on a collision course. I think more attention may need to be paid to them in terms of the sequencing.

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But I think certainly maybe hopefully we could do both in a relatively short period of time, but again, the economics has to be considered.

Student (47:33):

So, you see maybe the role of the Canterbury Apartments is more of well, a hindrance, not that bad. But[...].

L. Sullivan (47:39):

I don't see it as an ideal situation. I mean, my ideal would be to have those students who want to have a college experience living at college. That they would be able to do it right here rather than the moving back and forth. I mean, there's always been the possibility as far as I can recall of students who want to rent an apartment and kind of go. I guess they've always, you know, been able, you know, to do that. And I think for some, that's probably me a good idea, but I think a lot, find it much more convenient to have everything right here.

Student (48:16):

Okay. Right. Well, my having grown up in Poughkeepsie, I remember that Marist who had a kind of negative background in the 70's and people really didn't think too much of it. And growing up right down the road, I really didn't even know it was here until like the early 80's. And then all of a sudden, it's like a sudden change and people started talking highly of Marist. I was wondering, what do you think the college did to change public opinion in that way?

L. Sullivan (48:39):

Well, that's really interesting that you had that perspective. I was hoping that Marist was well, you know, [?] all along.

Student (48:56):

Well, you know, it just kind of has come done a 180 degree turn in the last 10 years or so.

L. Sullivan (49:03):

Well, there have been dramatic changes in the 80's. I mean the big kind of campus explosion, I suppose. Since I came here, because the dorms were pretty much in place, you know, in the early 60's. But during Linus Foy's administration, the McCann Center came into being. It was hard to imagine that McCann Center was actually on this property. I mean, it just was such a marvelous addition. [...] Up to that point in time, Marian Hall was our gym. And I remember walking into that in 1947 as a brand-new building. And I don't know that I had ever been in such a big building but then the McCann Center made things quite different on campus. And that was maybe the major event, I guess of the seventies, with Dennis Murray's arrival in the Fall of '79. I think he [...] and this is just my perception. I think he committed himself to much more visibility of Marist. I think Linus was a very strong president and a strong presence in a much more subtle way. I don't think Dennis Murray's style is a subtle one. I think it's a very upfront, public-relations approach to bringing Marist College into focus. And I think that was done in a number of ways, certainly adding the kinds of people he did to the board of trustees, people that really represented a broad spectrum of Dutchess County life [...] kind of gave that particular definition. Then of course, I think the restructuring of the administration into the number of vice presidents

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and an executive vice president, it certainly amplified, you know, so many things that were much more low profiled previously. So that kind of gave it a different spin. Then you add the Lowell Thomas Communication Center and then this last year, the Dyson Center. [...] That's one of the things about Marist. It's so unpredictable. I mean, you kind of think you know, what's going to happen and then you're not really sure. But I think the Dyson Center was another development that surely gained significant recognition, I think at least in terms of local community. And then naturally I think when you have groups of students, as we see going around with a student representative, you know, just to view the campus as a possible choice for their college education, I think it's a wonderful campus for them to visit. I think there are so many exciting things to experience here.

Student ([53:17](#)):

And you being involved with the students as you are, how would you say that they feel about the college, like over the years? Did they say positive, you know? We kind of said this before more how they view it as positive or negative experience. We kind of talked more about as fraternities. But how do you feel the students feel? Did they feel that they get a positive education or a positive experience?

L. Sullivan ([53:42](#)):

Well, of course, naturally my response will be related to the students that I hear from. You know, over the years. And I guess all I would say is that I'm not gonna be hearing from the student that were disenchanted. 'Cause they tend to disconnect. I have consistently, you know, had the good fortune. That's one of the things I really enjoy here. In fact, there's probably a student in each of the years here whose parents I taught you see? And when I see a student who graduated, you know, 20 or more years ago, who then wants to provide for his or her daughter or her son or her daughter later on to provide that same kind of educational experience. I mean I would say that that reflects their judgment. And each year when we come to the homecoming weekend with the alumni come back and, you know they're very anxious to renew the old ties. And I think to me that always speaks of their acceptance of the experience that they had here as a really good and important one.

Student ([55:16](#)):

That's awesome. Thank you very much. I think we finished. Well, do you have anything you want to add?

L. Sullivan ([55:22](#)):

I was hoping maybe I'd have a chance to sing.

Student ([55:24](#)):

Sure. We're open. [laughter]

L. Sullivan ([55:28](#)):

I wanna thank you because [...] I'm always thinking about, I think I'm always thinking about what I'm doing. But you know, this was a different way of doing it. And I have valued my years here, not only as a student, because obviously it's clear to me now that experience 40 years ago

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has in a very definite way, more than I knew, then, you know, it was shaping my future. And I really have great hopes that Marist will continue to thrive and to develop simply because it has, people like you that are kind of committed to your education and you've chosen to make that commitment here. And you know, while we have that, I think we have something very good. Okay.

Student ([56:49](#)):

Alright. That's a wrap. Thank you. Thank you very much. Welcome.