Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Dr. Stephen Trainor, English professor, former Dean of Undergraduate Studies

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Dr. Stephen Trainor on February 25, 2020 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. Dr. Trainor is an English professor at Salve Regina. So to start us off, Dr. Trainor, what was your pre-Salve experience and how did you get here?

Trainor: … Well, I went to Holy Cross as an undergrad and then Notre Dame for graduate school. I got my first job out in Indiana… at St. Mary-of-the-Woods College, which was a small women’s college near Tahoe [Terre Haute]. Then I was there for eleven years on that… I’m from New England. I’m from Worcester, and [I was] always eager to get back east where my family was. At the time, I decided there was greater mobility in administration than in teaching. I was lucky to have a teaching job at that point; it was the first real glut of Ph.Ds . I decided to hone my administrative skills, and then I was hired at Lesley College. It’s now Lesley University, but Lesley College in Cambridge. I thought that was… a good place to be then. Lesley, as you know, is primarily teacher-preparation, although they do have business and they do have social work, but I was in charge of everything else. I was in charge of the humanities… and the sciences as well. That was kind of fun being in Boston, being in Cambridge, so that was a really good experience there. It was also a women’s college at the time… From there then [I went on to] a position as Dean up at Rivier College in New Hampshire, so I went up there and I was there for six years… Then I saw this job, Dean of Undergraduate Studies here at Salve, advertised, and thought, “Oh, that sounds like an up-and-coming place,” and so I applied and was hired.

Gillibrand: Awesome! And this will make a bit [of] sense later on, but I remember from going on… the Oxford trip with you that you said you did some graduate work over…

Trainor: In Oxford, yes! Yes, yes, yes! Right! I’m so ancient that I wrote my dissertation before there was an internet, so that if you wanted to see certain texts you had to travel, which I thought was advantageous in a lot of ways. Looking back on it, I’m very glad of it. Everything of course that I wanted… I was working on an 18th-century playwright, so most of the texts were 17th and 18th century… They weren’t even available on microfilm, you had to go to Oxford, so I was very glad of that. So I had a letter of introduction from Notre Dame to the keeper of the Western manuscripts at the Bodleian Library for it then. I met with him, he gave me my library card, and so I could just… [dive] into it. You know, the Bodleian is like a combination of Harvard and the Library of Congress because it’s not only… a university library, but it’s also the library of record in the United Kingdom, so every book that is published in England and Ireland they have to send a copy to the Bodleian, so they get 80 or 100 copies a week of books. The space is the difficult thing. They had everything I wanted down to one of two copies of the will of the man that I was working on, which is interesting because it gives you some idea of what his situation was at the end of his life. Anyway, that was great fun! That was my introduction to Oxford, and I’ve been in love with it ever since.

Gillibrand: And we’ll get into that a lot more later on ‘cause I really want to talk about your Oxford experiences, but you started at Salve as Dean of Undergraduate Studies?

Trainor: Yes.

Gillibrand: So what were some of your responsibilities as Dean? What were some of the projects or things that you took on?

Trainor: Well, it was interesting. There was a lot of room then for innovation at the time, and a lot of encouragement to do things. I remember the second day in my office. The director of admissions came to my office and said, “We need an honors program.” I said, “Okay! I can do that.” It was kind of interesting. I was concerned to [devise] something unique, and I was sharing a house my first year with the new director at the Pell Center. Rick Nuccio[[1]](#footnote-1) was the first director of the Pell Center. He was a wonderful man. One night over supper we hammered out the details of the honors program and decided to link it to the Pell Center. That’s why it’s called the Pell Honors Program. Senator Pell[[2]](#footnote-2) was still alive at the time, and he was just thrilled at the idea. He really very much liked the idea, but that also accounts for the focus on international relations and public policy, why you have to do either an internship or a study abroad experience… That was one of the first things I could put in place… and that was pretty quick. We got a big grant from the government… to help institute it. That worked out very well. Under the heading of sheer hubris, I went to my first faculty meeting and announced [that] in two years we would have a new core curriculum. There was an audible intake of breath at the time on it! I said, “Here’s the schedule, alright: We have a year to design it and a year to implement it…” People were good enough to go along with that. They rather liked that… I thought we needed to do more with the first year experience then. We instituted that. John Rok,[[3]](#footnote-3) who was then Vice President for Student Affairs, very kindly detached one of his staff members, [Antonia Kapola] and assigned her to my office to run the first year experience. She was a very creative person… We revamped the new student seminar. This is where we had the idea of linking it to core courses, alright then, the F.Y.T[[4]](#footnote-4) now… The students as a cohort take the F.Y.T and then they take the University Seminar. Well, it wasn’t the University Seminar at the time… There was an English course and then there was a… philosophy, religious studies course. We linked the first year experience courses, the new student seminars to that, so that’s where that custom comes from. Also, [I] instituted the sophomore mentor program… at the time, which continues down to the present day. It was a pretty good first year then with the core and the honors program and then the first year experience. Once again, a lot of encouragement and a lot of room for innovation. I liked it. I enjoyed my time as an administrator.

Gillibrand: That’s excellent ‘cause the Pell Honors Program… I know, I’m a Pell student, so that’s something that’s… been very successful!

Trainor: Yes!

Gillibrand: … So that’s really cool to hear that story! Now as a professor, what are some of the types of courses that you’ve taught at Salve and are there any that you consider to be your specialty?

Trainor: … Yes! Well, one of my personal heroes is Cardinal Newman,[[5]](#footnote-5) the great English educator from the 19th century. He wrote *The Idea of a University*. It’s still to this day it’s pretty much the [hand]book for liberal education. It’s the [definitive] statement on it. Newman, he was just declared a saint, as a matter of fact, over in Rome in October, and I went for the occasion. I always promised myself that if his canonization happened in my lifetime I would be there. He says that [and] focuses on integration, the idea of a liberal education is not that you should take a smattering of things, but that you should pull them all together, that you should be able to look at the world whole and entire and complete. You should be able to see many things as parts of one whole. A lot of the thrust of my courses has been on integration. It has been interdisciplinary. What I’ve done is to devise a series of city courses because if you focus on one place and one time you can see how the different disciplines connect. I did a course on 5th century B.C. Athens, so you could do the literature, you could do the histories, you could do the philosophy, you could do the art, you could do the architecture at the time, and just see how everything comes together. Then similarly there’s a course on Renaissance Florence. Once again you do the art, you do the politics, Machiavelli, you do the *Divine Comedy*, you do the literature and see how they all fit together. Right now I’m teaching a course on Habsburg Vienna which focuses on Vienna from 1889-1914 on that 25-year period at the turn of the century. That’s fun because you can do psychology, music and the like… Also similarly the Harlem course, the Harlem Renaissance. You can sense the pattern there!

Gillibrand: Yes!

Trainor: … A lot of it is going to be necessarily about the literature. It’s fun because you get to do the art, you get to do music, you get to do theater. I enjoy that enormously, and I think the students respond well to it as well.

Gillibrand: Absolutely. And just from what I’ve recognized knowing you as a professor and everything is that you tend to teach a lot of the Pell Special Topics. Is it because of that idea of being able to bring in all these different components like history and the literature and all that together that just [works] well for those types of courses?

Trainor: Yes! The general thrust is they should focus on integrating things and being multidisciplinary, so I like it on that score.

Gillibrand: Great! Sticking with the theme of cities and everything, one of the other classes that I’ve taken with you so I know that you teach it is Literature of Oxford during the short term study abroad trip there. So you’ve been involved with that program for a pretty long while now, so how did you get started becoming involved with that program and how did that start up?

Trainor: It dates back to me having gone there as a graduate student, my great love of it there. I mean, you share it so I don’t have to explain it to you! It’s heaven for academics to go there! While I was still Dean, the director of study abroad, George Antone,[[6]](#footnote-6) asked me to head up the England trip. It started up, we went over. It was a winter trip. We’d go to Oxford and then we would go to Bath for a day and then end up down in London. It was very intense to be sure. Then he also had running a month-long program at Oxford at St. Clare’s.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is an interesting story there because the man who was [in] Philosophy, [Dr. Jim Hersh] had gone to St. Clare’s when he was an undergraduate student back in the 1960s, and that’s how we happened to be connected with St. Clare’s. He asked me, Dr. Antone, asked me to go along with him, Dr. Hersh[[8]](#footnote-8) to Oxford for the month long program, and I’ve been going on that ever since. I think that’s probably my favorite course simply because it’s so experiential: as you know, we get out everyday to see the places that we’re reading about, which is really a rare opportunity. It’s literature set in Oxford, and my original title for the course was “The Oxford of Literature,” but somebody kept correcting for it, so I said, “Well, just go with it!” The focus was on a sense of place, on setting. I like that because it kind of recreates almost a 19th-century ideal of living and learning and in community. You’re in the same building with the students. You eat with them. You have class together, then we’d go out like for drinks afterwards and maybe linger on to supper, onto vespers at New College, Evensong[[9]](#footnote-9) they call it, of course. Then… a concert in the evening! You’re just constantly thrown in together! It’s [a] very holistic experience… As I say, it’s kind of an ideal that would be hard to replicate here, but over there you can do it.

Gillibrand: Absolutely! So, you’ve already touched upon this a little bit, but what has the experience been like over the many times that you’ve been able to go over there? Do you have any moments that kind of stick out to you as like maybe your favorites, and just what’s it like bringing students to another part of the world and seeing them in that type of environment that’s off campus and the whole experience of you’re with them all the time…

Trainor: … I think it’s wonderful! I think it’s wonderful, I really do enjoy it! I think moments of serendipity, like when we went to that concert at the Sheldonian. That’s always very nice then. As I say, the hardest thing about Oxford is when you’ve chosen to do something for the evening that means there are three other things that you’re not doing because there’s just such a variety of things. The Catholic halls at Oxford University used to sponsor a Newman lecture every year… Usually it fell when we were there, but then they’ve rescheduled it. It comes at a different time, but that, I thought, was particularly wonderful. You get to hear Alasdair MacIntyre[[10]](#footnote-10) the great philosopher, speaking about Newman. That was really nice. Then another time we got to go to a lecture at Cardinal Newman’s college, Trinity College. That was really, very lovely, very wonderful. Just the intensity of it. I always share this phrase from Walter Pater,[[11]](#footnote-11) urging them to always, “burn with a hard gem-like flame.” Pater said, “It’s not the fruits of the experience, but the experience itself is what we seek,” trying to get people in the mood for that. I was sharing that with the students one afternoon when we were having class in the Lamb and Flag,[[12]](#footnote-12) and this girl came up to me in tears and said, “Promise me that you’ll always repeat that at every class that you teach on into the future.” I said, “Okay!” That was very nice. On another occasion we were having class down at Christ Church Meadow at the river where you can see the boats sculling along, and a girl came up to me and said, “Would it be okay if I skipped?” I said, “Skipped class?” She said, “No! Skip! I’m just so happy!” I said, “You go for it!” Moments like that, just the lovely thing of being in Oxford. Going to St. Philip’s bookstore. I was able to get first editions of Cardinal Newman’s books, *The Apologia* and *The Idea of a University*. They’re just sitting on the shelves at St. Philip’s! This is so much the Oxford experience. As I say, to me the archetypal thing is that lovely circumstance that you meet for class and then class bleeds over into the evening. Evensong at New College, then we go to supper, then you come back and you’re in the common room with the students still. At some point you have to let the students have some time by themselves, but it’s just a wonderful experience. I think it’s kind of like an ideal, which is hard to replicate.

Gillibrand: Absolutely! As a student that’s been on that it’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing that you experience over there. So transitioning back to Salve a bit, where you’ve been here for so long have you served on different committee works here at Salve, and if so which ones have you been a part of?

Trainor: Well, as Dean I had to chair the Academic Council, which is the meeting of all the department chairs. That’s always fun! A bit of a challenge. I’ve worked on that. I think that was the big one, but then similarly you’d be on things like faculty handbook. Also, one of the things I wanted to do, we had a four-four teaching load, and I thought that that seemed a little hard for people, so I was able to persuade the president[[13]](#footnote-13) to go to a four-three model, which is what we have now. I had to meet with people on that, wanting to work with faculty on coming up with a model of how we would achieve that. So those are some of the things. Then of course meetings of the Pell Honors group. [I’d] have to call those together, plan out the curriculum for the year. That was some of my committee experience.

Gillibrand: Great! Sticking with students and everything, Dr. Quinn[[14]](#footnote-14) had mentioned that a couple of years ago you had received Teacher of the Year, was that right?

Trainor: Yes, yes!

Gillibrand: So what was that like? How did receiving that award make you feel and everything?

Trainor: Oh, that was kind of the high point in my career I think! In lots of ways, I like it because the students choose who gets it. That was very meaningful for me to get that. You have to be teaching full time for three years before you’re eligible for it. I got it in my first year of eligibility, so I was very pleased on that score. It was a great honor, it was really a great honor. I was just thrilled, like I said, particularly on the score that the students get to choose who gets it.

Gillibrand: … That must add just like an extra level because… although you work with your fellow faculty and people like that, the students are who you’re with most of the time!

Trainor: … Yes!

Gillibrand: Even though it’s a little bit delayed, congratulations on that!

Trainor: … Thank you!

Gillibrand: Now between working in administration and your work in the English department and study abroad, I can only imagine that the list of people that you’ve worked closely with is extensive, but are there any people that come to mind as people that you’ve really worked closely with throughout your time at Salve or people that have really made an impact on your experience here?

Trainor: Oh yes! Well, Dr. George Antone would be one. He was in the History department. He was heading up study abroad then, so I got to work with him a lot. He had a very wide and copious few[view] of things. I very much enjoyed working with him. In the English department, Dr. Harrington-Lueker[[15]](#footnote-15) was chair for a while. I very much enjoyed working with her. I think she had a good sense of the department and a good sense of supporting faculty and what they wanted to do and the choices that they had made. Dr. Quinn is another person that I very much admire and enjoy as a colleague. We both went to Notre Dame, so we have that in common. Those are some of the people who were very meaningful [to] me.

Gillibrand: Excellent! Again, with all the different experiences you’ve had here I can only imagine you’ve worked with many, many students, whether it be here or travelling abroad or your interactions while you were the Dean, so how have you seen students change and adapt and evolve throughout the years?

Trainor: Yes! I think the honors program made a big difference in a lot of ways because I think it recognized students for their abilities and for their application, their hard work, their study skills. I remember when I was proposing the Honors program to the faculty I said, “If we have a student who’s in trouble, if we have a student who’s struggling academically, then all of the resources of the university come into play to help them out. We have so much at our disposal. We have tutors, we have the academic development center,[[16]](#footnote-16) we’ve got the Writing Center.” But I said, “If students are really good we don’t do much for them.” I think this has made a difference… [for] these students, even though it’s maybe one or two classes that they’re taking in the honors program per semester. Well, you know from your own experience. I think it just to be in with a community of people who are very intelligent, very high powered who have a kind of free-floating intellectual curiosity beyond, “Is this going to be on the test?” who are here to learn. I think the honors program has made a difference and has kind of lifted things up a bit. When I came the students were not experiencing a whole lot of academic rigor. There was an awful phrase that stuck in my mind that I heard a lot my first year, [which was] people referring to the university as “Salve High.” That it really wasn’t much different from their high school experience. I’m glad to say I don’t hear that very much anymore. I think, once again, simply the presence of an honors program is going to make that difference, is going to say, “Yes, here’s something that is more challenging for you…” Surely, sitting down and taking a class on Chinese philosophy with Professor Catterson.[[17]](#footnote-17) It would not be [a] high-school subject, would it? I think what we’ve seen is a… higher aspiration to intellectual excellence over the years. One of the things I like about the Oxford program is that even though it wasn’t designed as a Pell program, it became kind of the unofficial Pell program… It was very interesting at the Pell dinner at the end of senior year just to see how many people went to Oxford over the course of the four years. It’s really quite striking. I think yes, the quality of the students has gradually improved over time… because we’re challenging, because we give them these greater opportunities to shine. One of the things that I particularly like is the senior thesis. I think it’s one of those difficult things that when you’re finished with it you find yourself transformed, which is the whole point, as you know, of course.

Gillibrand: Absolutely! As a student it seems daunting when you’re first looking at it, but then by the time you finish it’s something [to be proud of] because not all universities require it. The fact that different departments at Salve do it sets you apart.

Trainor: Sure, sure! It brings you up to a new other level! Once again, it’s a custom that dates back to the medieval universities where you would make a public defense of your idea, your thesis. I love that we continue that, that [it’s] not just writing, but then the public oral defense. I think both English and History have a very strong tradition of doing a good job on the senior thesis. I like that, and that I think, once again, it has been helpful for students. The other thing is simply the expansion of the study abroad program has been very helpful for our students as well. Dr. Antone’s efforts and Erin Fitzgerald’s[[18]](#footnote-18) efforts have greatly expanded the number of students who go abroad. I think that has an impact. You come back with a whole different worldview if you spend a semester or a month in a foreign country. You see the world differently.

Gillibrand: Absolutely. Kind of bringing that to a whole, how have you seen Salve itself kind of change, and you touched on that with the expansion of study abroad and increased level of students coming into Salve and everything.

Trainor: … Yes! We’re taking ourselves very seriously as a university. If you look at the combination of the honors program, the study abroad program, the Pell Center, all of these things give us a certain stature and a certain, just like tonight, Cornel West[[19]](#footnote-19) coming. That’s really a great honor for us to have. I think so. I think there’s been greater effort at diversity in the student population, which I think is important and that we should try to continue to encourage on into the future. Also, I think we could make a better effort of diversity in the faculty as well.

Gillibrand: That’s great! That leads perfectly into my last question for you, and that’s what do you hope or predict for Salve moving forward?

Trainor: Well, I think it’s very exciting to have a new president coming in with her background, [having] been at Boston College. I think that gives us a good model of what we should be. I think what I would like to see then is we could continue to work on our identity as a Catholic liberal arts university, and to make that more the definition of who we are. I think there is a whole Catholic intellectual tradition dating back to Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal Newman. We have lots to draw on. I would hope to see that continue, and that our identity as a Catholic university would be strengthened. Once again, not proselytizing, not trying to convert people or anything, but there is a philosophy of education that we can draw on. I mean, we invented the universities back in the Middle Ages. I think strengthening that, solidifying that would be my hope for the future…

Gillibrand: Excellent… so those were the questions I had for you. Was there anything else that you wanted to add that we didn’t touch upon before I stop the recording?

Trainor: Well, I just would like to say that one of the things that I have enjoyed so much about Salve is just the encouragement to be creative… I’ve been able to develop a lot of new courses, and the courses seem to be things that the students like. One of my favorites is the Inklings course… of course it’s very Oxford oriented… but it’s kind of fun because we conduct it not as a class, but as if it were the Inklings, as if it were a literary society. There are no tests, there are no quizzes, there are no exams. I don’t get up and lecture. The students come in everyday and there’s a report on one of the Inklings and then somebody reads from the text that we’re studying at the time, kind of replicating the idea of [J.R.R] Tolkien reading first drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* to the Inklings. Oh, another student presents a paper on the reading, on the topic, and then that student is required to conduct a discussion on it. It’s amazing to me how the students throw themselves into that… I like to have it at that 3:45-5:00 [p.m.] slot so that we have tea, we have cookies. The students will bake things. I remember one year somebody found a recipe from *The Lord of the Rings* and replicated it. At the end, instead of having an exam we go to the Fastnet [Pub] downtown to replicate the Eagle and Child.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Fastnet people are always very welcoming… They always give us the little section of the room. People are required to come up with a toast to the Inklings. We have a nice time on that. That, ironically, I think is one of my favorite courses. I say ironically because it’s the one where I do the least! After setting it up, the students really just take it and run with it...

Gillibrand: They take control of it!

Trainor: … Yes! They rise to the occasion. It’s very popular. It’s always full. One year, it was waitlisted by twelve by… 2 o’clock in the afternoon on the first day…

Gillibrand: Oh my gosh!

Trainor: So I went to Dr. Ramsey[[21]](#footnote-21) and said, “Look, if you want I’ll teach another section of it.” One semester I had two sections of the Inklings, fifty students doing this. That was very intense… I loved it! As I say, the students seem to like it. I always take it as a good sign when students cry at the end of a class because it’s over and that they’re going to miss it. You know you’ve succeeded then.

Gillibrand: Exactly! And that just shows your strength as a professor that you’re teaching classes that by the first day… people are already trying to join the waitlist in hopes that they can join the class…

1. Richard Nuccio was the first director of the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina. Before Salve, Nuccio served as a special advisor to Cuba under Bill Clinton’s administration. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Senator Claiborne Pell was a U.S. Senator for Rhode Island from the 1960s to 1990s. He was highly involved and supportive of the efforts of Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Rok is a professor at Salve Regina in the Religious Studies Department, and is the former Vice President of Student Affairs. John Rok participated in the Salve Regina Oral History Project, and his interview is available through the Salve Regina Digital Commons. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Referencing the First Year Transition course, which is required for freshmen. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cardinal John Henry Newman was an English Catholic theologian active throughout the 19th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dr. George Antone worked on the faculty and served as the director of the Office of International Programs and was a professor of history at Salve Regina until 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. St. Clare’s is an international day and boarding college in Oxford, England. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dr. James Hersh is a professor emeritus at Salve Regina who taught in the Philosophy department. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Evensong is a choral service at New College, Oxford University. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alasdair MacIntyre is a moral and political philosopher who taught for many years at the University of Notre Dame. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Walter Peter was a 19th-century English writer and Oxford University professor. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Lamb and Flag is a pub in downtown Oxford, notable for being a writing spot for author Thomas Hardy. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Referencing Dr. M. Therese Antone, RSM served as president of the university from 1994-2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dr. John Quinn is a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dr. Donna Harrington-Lueker is a professor of English and Communications along with Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Now the Academic Center for Excellence. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dr. Troy Catterson is a philosophy professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Erin Fitzgerald is the director of international programs at Salve Regina. She succeeded Dr. Antone in 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cornel West came to Salve Regina’s campus on February 25, 2020 as a part of the Multicultural Education Week. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The Eagle and Child is a pub in downtown Oxford, notable for the Inklings meetings with authors such as J.R.R Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Dr. D. Matthew Ramsey is an English communications and film professor at Salve Regina. Dr. Ramsey is currently the chair of the Department of English. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)