Salve Regina Oral History Project

Date of interview: August 20th, 2019

Date of completed transcription: October 22nd, 2020

Interviewee: Colleen Emerson, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions, 1988 to present

Interviewer: Anna Paradis

Anna Paradis: Okay, I am Anna Paradis and I’m here interviewing Ms. Colleen Emerson who is our [Dean] of Undergraduate Admissions here at Salve. Today is August 20th, and I am doing this for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. So, to get us started off today, what brought you to Salve Regina?

Colleen Emerson: Well, it’s kind of interesting, I actually graduated from college and back then you’d look for a job in the newspaper.

Paradis: Okay.

Emerson: So, I actually looked in the want ads of the *Newport Daily News* and they were looking for someone to work in –specifically in the business office- here in human resources.

Paradis: Okay.

Emerson: So, I submitted my resume –I mailed it the good old fashioned way like we used to do and I came in for an interview with … Bill Hall[[1]](#footnote-1).

Paradis: Okay.

Emerson: And Bill actually at that time said, “You know what? I think you’d be great in Admissions.” I was thinking to myself “What is Admissions?”… I had no idea that there was such a thing, even though I had gone through the college process myself and had gone on interviews and everything. So he ended up recommending me to the Undergraduate Admissions Department and I interviewed for a position and the rest is history I guess.

Paradis: That’s wonderful.

Emerson: So that was over thirty-one years ago!

Paradis: Wow, that’s wonderful.

Emerson: Yeah.

Paradis: Such a great story! Alright, so what have the biggest changes been in Admissions since you first came here?

Emerson: Well, gosh there’s so many over the course of thirty-one years. Just everything from the way that we do our day-to-day business in terms of moving from being a very paper-heavy office to actually everything being streamlined …and everything being through CRM. And even the way students apply to colleges now- everything is online. It’s very rare that we touch a piece of paper, though we are still very old-fashioned and we believe that the first impression we should make when a student is accepted into the University is that we send out a paper copy of their letter. We don’t release it online first. A lot of schools will go in that direction, but we’re still old-fashioned in that way.

Paradis: Yes.

Emerson: We actually do a paper letter. But that’s changed dramatically and with that –just even the way we plan everything. The staff travels a lot, so gone are the days when I first started. I’d go to AAA and they’d map out my entire trip for me!

Paradis: Oh my goodness.

Emerson: To now, you know, just before you came in I was booking a visit with a school in Minnesota … online.

Paradis: Wow.

Emerson: You know, just the way it worked into my schedule, I updated my schedule automatically right away. Nothing in terms of having to go to AAA or anything like that. I have my directions and everything all set for me.

Paradis: That’s wonderful.

Emerson: And just the school in general has changed so much so I guess we’ll talk about that a little more.

Paradis: Yes, definitely. I actually wanted to talk to you about the changes in the school itself. For example, our push to recruit male students, minority students, foreign students and students outside of New England. Do you mind talking a little bit about that?

Emerson: Sure, I don’t mind talking about that at all. So when I came here –I came here in 1988- Salve had been co-ed for quite a few years already[[2]](#footnote-2) though [we] still had that reputation as being an all-women school.

Paradis: Yes.

Emerson: We still get that, actually sometimes-

Paradis: Really?

Emerson: -when we’re out on the road. …It’s slowly going away [though].

Paradis: Yes.

Emerson: But I think that we’re sometimes dealing with the parents that are of that generation when they knew it as an all-girls school… It’s something that … -during my entire tenure here, that’s the thing we have been working on. The male enrollment has steadily increased. I don’t think until we have some giant major that’s going to change things that …we’re going to shift that balance in any way. I would assume that maybe we’d increase incrementally, but I can’t ever see us being fifty-fifty. Having a nursing program and an education program, that really attracts a lot of female students, though we’re seeing more and more males opting for those majors too. We clearly have a very strong commitment to diversity. We actually –for a number of years we’ve had a position in the office, someone who is the coordinator of multicultural recruitment but I’ve always made it a point –and our staff has always embraced the fact that while we have a point person for that, we are all multicultural recruiters. So it’s a part of all of our jobs, a part of our travel. We’re making sure that we’re doing that additional outreach so that we continue to try to attract a more diverse student body. Then quite honestly, in terms of geographic diversity, it’s something we’re really concerned about, and we’re making a real conscious effort to recruit outside [of] our traditional territory of New England and the Mid-Atlantic states because in everything you look at the population of college bound students is dropping dramatically in this area. We also live in a very saturated market in terms of higher education opportunities so we are expanding our outreach in our travel. This year, we’ll be traveling pretty extensively outside of New England. [Right now] we’re really … targeting areas where …there’s a few different things involved- there is a preponderance of New Englanders maybe in other areas-

Paradis: Okay.

Emerson: There are direct flights from different areas that can go right into T.F. Green [Airport] here in Providence to make it easy.

Paradis: I didn’t even think about that.

Emerson: We also tend to attract students wherever there’s water, so whether it’s lake or ocean, students tend to be drawn to this area. As I mentioned, I am scheduling a visit [to] Minnesota. So I’ll go out and cover that area, but we’ll have staff that are going to Florida, North and South Carolina, we’ll hit Georgia and we’re hitting Saint Louis, California, Colorado, Washington (state). Going a little further south of the Mid-Atlantic so, Washington D.C., Maryland, Virginia. We’ll also travel to Illinois –I’m sure I’m missing things, but that’s kind of like where we’re focusing on right now. We actually have a representative who is –his office is on the West Coast- … based out of Seattle and he … travels that whole western part of the United States for us. So as we’re trying to grow those markets, we’ve been very purposeful in that all of our staff has a distance market [of] at least one. If they’re not traveling there, we’re doing what we call ‘armchair recruiting’, so actively -any inquiry we get from those areas- …replying to them and being and maybe doing, something a little different in terms of outreach. A real personal approach, which we pride ourselves on, but [also] offering that opportunity for a phone interview, or a skype, or a Facetime interview to try to grow those areas as well.

Paradis: Wonderful. I didn’t even think of all those things!...

Emerson: Yeah!

Paradis: Wow! That is awesome. Okay, so I wanted to ask you about the increase in merit based scholarships in the ‘90s, and whether or not you think that has helped with recruiting students?

Emerson: It’s a necessity: you have to do it. So yes, we have seen –just in higher ed. in general, there is a lot of very price conscious families and we’ve seen that increase dramatically, especially over the past few years. Those families are really looking for the best price for an institution. It might not always be the student’s first choice, but they’re being very, very careful about the amount of debt that they’re taking on.

Paradis: Yes.

Emerson: We did institute a scholarship program back in the ‘90s… really as a way to help market Salve a little bit more. Our criteria were very transparent at that time, in that it revolved around GPA, class rank, and students’ test scores. That has evolved a lot over time, in that, now we are evaluating students really on a more holistic basis with academics being the biggest part of a merit award, but we’re also looking at: “What can a student contribute to campus? What have they been involved in high school both in the classroom [and] outside of school? Are they working outside of school? Are they involved in their community?” Because really what we want is to create a student population here that is very involved and so over the past few years our scholarships have moved in that direction, so that we’re awarding students for being well-rounded. But it is a necessity in higher ed. now. It’s unbelievable! It’s usually the first question that a family will ask at this point. They also want to see: “What is going to be the return on my investment? What are students doing after they graduate?” People have really become much smarter in terms of their college search and actually putting a lot of thought into it.

Paradis: Well, that’s wonderful. Thank you. And then, speaking of academics, I wanted to ask you –because I know that you had said prior to this that you had completed your graduate degree here. I was wondering if you don’t mind talking about doing your graduate degree while working here?

Emerson: Sure.

Paradis: Thank you.

Emerson: That was a long time ago so I’m trying to think back. So I started –we have a wonderful benefit here that we can get our master’s degree for free.

Paradis: Yes.

Emerson: For free while working here. So I actually ended up graduating with my M.B.A and I’m going to date myself here, I believe it was 1995 [when] I got my M.B.A. So I worked on it over the course of a few years –definitely had to stretch it out because back in that time I was traveling a lot for Admissions.

Paradis: Okay.

Emerson: So I’d have a full travel schedule in the fall and then also in the spring too so it was trying to balance those things.

Paradis: Yeah.

Emerson: So it took me a little longer than I probably originally planned on, but it was a great opportunity to …just to advance myself and get a better understanding of what it was like to be in the classroom here.

Paradis: Yes.

Emerson: Just because I didn’t get my undergraduate [degree] here. So it was a great opportunity for me to see what it’s like in the classroom, working with professors. But yeah, I’m glad I did it. It was definitely not easy while working, but I did it before I had children, because I don’t think I could ever have done it that way.

Paradis: Wonderful. Well, congratulations. Good for you!

Emerson: Thank you.

Paradis: That sounds like quite a hectic schedule! Okay, so do you mind speaking about significant colleagues you’ve worked with in the past? For example, Sister Roselina?

Emerson: Oh Sister Roselina McKillop! Yes! So Sister Roselina was the Dean of Admissions when I first started working here… This was her office, and it seems pretty crazy that I’m sitting here now. Sister Roselina’s sister, Sister Lucille McKillop was the President[[3]](#footnote-3).

Paradis: Okay.

Emerson: So, I worked with Sister Roselina. It was very interesting, I had never gone to Catholic school, …even though I grew up Catholic… so it was interesting all of a sudden working for a Sister of Mercy. She was a little tough, but I don’t think I’d be here today had she not been. Yeah, it’s just really funny. I’m so happy to see the Sister of Mercy tradition carrying on, though there are so few left.

Paradis: Yes.

Emerson: Back when I first started working here, I actually would try to soak up any information about the Sisters whether it be from Sister Roselina or some of the other Sisters that worked here. There was one particular nun –and I can’t remember, her name is escaping me. I’d go up and I’d visit her. Her office was up in the mezzanine here in Ochre Court. She was responsible for the records and things and I’d just go up and … pick her brain about things. Also, Sister Esther Whalen who passed away just last year. She was just an amazing person. She was not a Sister of Mercy: she was actually a Sister of the Sacred Heart. She had actually gotten her undergrad –…at Manhattanville College, where I also went.

Paradis: Oh, wonderful.

Emerson: So I formed a great bond with her. Yeah, just some great people throughout the years that I’ve worked with. Some [are] still here, which is funny…

Paradis: That’s wonderful. And then to finish us off… what are some challenges you foresee in regards to enrollment in the future? Anything challenging Admissions that you foresee?

Emerson: I think higher ed. in general, is challenging at this point in time. I think that Salve is in a very solid position …which makes me feel good, but we can’t rest on that. We have to continue to look inward in order to look outward and to make the necessary changes so that we can address those issues that families have. You know: “What is the return on my investment? The cost of higher ed. Is it worth it in general to go on to college?” But I think that Salve is very well poised to continue to grow and make the changes that will help us move forward. It does get scary when we look in our backyard and see some schools closing. I don’t think we’re anywhere near that kind of a position, but we can’t rest on that… I often talk to my boss, the Vice President of Enrollment about the challenges and how sometimes I’m like, “We got into this for all the right reasons. Little did we know how challenging it would be and year after year it gets more challenging enrolling a class, especially in a very price sensitive market.” Yeah…

Paradis: I think that Salve is well set.

Emerson: I think so too.

Paradis: We have a lot of outreach.

Emerson: Absolutely.

Paradis: Well, thank you! Is there anything you’d like to add?

Emerson: Nothing I can think of.

Paradis: Well, if you think of anything you can email me.

Emerson: Perfect. If you have any follow up questions, you know, if you think of something as you’re writing things up, or if need me to clarify, or to add on…

Paradis: Well, thank you so much!

Emerson: You’re very welcome.

1. William Hall is Salve’s Vice President for the Administration and also the Chief Financial Officer. He has also been interviewed for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Salve Regina became coeducational in 1973 under President Lucille McKillop. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. She was President of Salve Regina from 1973 to 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)