JOHN L. MAHONEY

Interviewed by
Loretta Higgins

I suppose I would have to say that my coming to Boston College all began when I graduated from Boston College High School, which was then in the South End of Boston, not where it is now. When I graduated from BC High, where I had taken lots of Latin and Greek, I came to Boston College in 1955. It seemed the thing to do in those days, and I became a member of the so-called AB Greek Honors Program, where I had more Latin and Greek and where I met a quite wonderful professor, maybe two or three wonderful professors, all standouts, who became examples and encouragers for me. I think of people like the late Edward Hirsh and the late Albert Duhamel, and others. I don’t want to forget some people, but those two were strong undergraduate teaching influences.

When I graduated from Boston College, I was awarded an MA teaching fellowship while I was getting my master’s degree, and part of the deal then was that I had a chance to teach my own section of freshman English while I was a teaching fellow, and I fell in love with teaching. Along the way, I kept in touch with both Hirsh and Duhamel, especially with Hirsh, with whom I studied so much and whose courses I valued so much. I first met him in a course in the age of Dr. Johnson, 18th Century British Literature, and he set a great example of being a continuing scholar, a wide reader, a writer, and someone who cared about his students. The irony is that I am very close friends with his son, John, who is now a professor of English at Georgetown. We see each other probably three or four times a year when he comes back to Newton to visit family. Hirsh and Duhamel were strong recommeenders, not only orally, but in writing, when I decided I wanted to get a Ph.D. at Harvard. I felt that would prepare me for a long career in research and teaching. I was blessed in being admitted to Harvard, once again with a full teaching fellowship. I taught at both Harvard and Radcliffe, and enjoyed it immensely.

Now I want to get closer to the initial question about coming to Boston College and how there was always a sense in me of how important BC had been, and even though I knew I might like to go to school A or B or C or D with a brand new Harvard Ph.D., even though I had a couple of visitations and even an offer from another school. There were two Boston College faculty members teaching here in the School of Education. One of them was John Fitzgerald, still alive and well, a professor in the School of Education, and John McAleer, who passed away not too long ago. Both of these men were neighbors of mine and both were people I regarded highly. I think from them I had the sense that it would be a good thing to go to Boston College even though I was tempted seriously by one other school’s offer. So I came and I must add that one of the great tempters in all of this was the late Fr. Charles Donovan, and he knew he wanted the best for me, and thought it would be wonderful if I came to Boston College.

My school, my affiliation primarily, was with the School of Education. I taught English, which was part of the core curriculum they had in those days in the School of Ed, as we
used to call it and still do. Freshman year, a wide-ranging survey of major British writers was my first assignment. Can one imagine a fresh Ph.D. teaching everything from *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales* all the way up to contemporary literature? There was a second course in sophomore year which I didn’t teach, but where I really made connections with John McAleer, who was the sophomore teacher in the core curriculum program. I loved that affiliation with the School of Ed. I went to all of its faculty meetings; I became friendly with the men and women on the faculty, and it seemed to me that even though I knew my next affiliation would be different, I believed that my time spent in Education would be invaluable. It was the chair of the English department who lured me away because he knew my specialty was the Enlightenment, and the Romantics, and he wanted me to offer related courses. At that point, I became a member of the English Department, but with a teaching assignment in the School of Ed until the core curriculum spread across several schools.

As I recall now, there was diversity in the School of Ed, with a number of women faculty and, of course, a coed student body. I remember a fine historian, Louise Moore, among others. There were several Jesuits, but if I did not underline the importance of the lay faculty at that time, I would be missing the mark. While I think of the lay faculty, in English there was Maurice Quinlan, a medievalist and a brilliant educator. One woman, Clara Siggins, a superb English teacher whose assignment was in the School of Nursing but who came to all the English department meetings, was a person I got to know pretty well. We corresponded right up until the time of her death.

Interactions among the faculty were many and were great opportunities to get to know one another. It was a treat for me to be with my Jesuit colleagues and to know that they did not just retreat to St. Mary’s Hall when classes were over. The social functions on campus were enhanced by the Faculty Wives Club to which my wife Ann belonged. The women sponsored events, lectures, and holiday parties. For a short time, there was a Lay Faculty Club which was very loosely organized and soon just went out of existence. The Faculty Council, which was somewhat legislative, was developed shortly after that and met with the president from time to time to discuss faculty issues, needs, and faculty development. Much later, we had the Andover weekends. “May they live forever,” we all hoped, if for none other than selfish reasons. It was wonderful to arrive in Andover at the Inn on a Friday evening for a nice dinner, to have one’s own digs for two nights, breakfast in the morning, a great conference in which an agenda had been worked out for about twenty-five people or thereabouts from the various schools to sit informally and talk about issues, problems, strengths, and weaknesses, followed by a late afternoon liturgy where people from varying beliefs could gather, followed by another grand dinner and a departure on Sunday afternoon. Those Andover weekends did so much to create faculty warmth and connections. They were an important part of our lives and may they find a way of being continued at the new Dover retreat facility where we have already a few attempts. I hope they don’t peter out.

Looking back at my earlier days here, the campus was still mostly male and Boston College was a commuter school. Things were formal; collars, ties, and jackets were the look of the day. There were no complaints. I do not remember people all of a sudden putting on caps and
wearing blue jeans and what have you. This John Mahoney commuted daily from Somerville to Chestnut Hill, and my time here, wasn’t just about coming to class and going home. I was in the Fulton Debating Society and in a number of other activities. There was the Stylus, which offered the opportunity of creative writing. There was not a sense of a great many activities as is the case today. While I was a student, I worked at the Jesuit vacation place in Cohasset. I was working with the kitchen help, and Fr. Michael P. Walsh, who always had a winning way with others, was working on his dissertation. He was a great biologist who became a famous president of Boston College. I have tremendous admiration for Fr. Leahy, our current president, and for Fr. Monan, our chancellor and former president, but having had the opportunity to work with Fr. Mike Walsh when I was a young faculty member on the faculty council is, and will be, a treasured memory.

As a new faculty member, my office space was a bit crowded, much like that in other departments. I had a desk but no phone, although there was access to one down the hall. I was on the top floor of this building, Campion Hall, and I believe I was in room 318. I have already resolved in my mind that I am going upstairs after this interview to look at my old office. My colleague, John Fitzgerald, who got me interested in not going to New York to take my first teaching job, but to come here, shared the office with me. I mentioned earlier I still have the pleasure of seeing him and talking with him once in a while these days.

I don’t recall having a contract, but I did have a statement of some sort. It seems to me that salaries were determined by the dean. Later, in the early ’60s, I suspect the chair made a recommendation to the dean who passed it on to a higher level of administration with department people having some input. Teaching loads were heavy in the early days, at least by today’s standards. New adjustments had to happen with the new emphasis on heavy-duty research if one is expected to do a book every five years or accordingly. The teaching load is no heavier today than teaching two courses a semester.

I have taught a great many students. I am one of those curious creatures who has a record of every course I have taught at BC. Maybe someday the book will go into the archives as I come close to the end of formal teaching. My record book contains, along with names, the grades I gave. I can tell you without trying to sound like an exhibitionist in an exaggerated way that I taught at least a hundred students a semester. When I think of giving three or four papers a term and mid-semester exams, plus a final exam, that comes to quite a load. Let me add that I enjoyed every minute of it and still do.

In addition to one’s teaching, there was always involvement in departmental changes, especially those affecting the academic component. Starting back with my chairing the Self-study of the College of Arts and Sciences, we went through notable changes in the core curriculum. We looked at the way in which we emphasized core learning rather than just checking off courses on a dance card. We looked for something that widened the range of knowledge of literature, history, philosophy, and theology and then listed a range of courses. I had the privilege of working with the dean, Robert Barth, SJ, who was also a member of the Undergraduate Core Development Committee, which was a formal group chaired by Richard Cobb Stevens of the
Philosophy department, who may still be chairman. The Committee, when I was a member, met regularly to have visitations from all departments in the core to explain how the core connected with the larger curriculum. It was a great experience to be a part of it.

I was also a member of the University Academic Senate, which involved the entire University and its issues, which centered on faculty research, publications, involvement in extracurricular affairs, unrest, and a whole range of other topics. The Senate did not last long because of Cambodia, Kent State, and a pending rise in tuition. Activities of all kinds began to slow down during the late ’60s. It would be good to have a University Senate again, with the social crisis in which we find ourselves today in which health and health insurance are concerns, among other issues. It would be wonderful if we could have that kind of university communication once more.

Diversity among faculty and students began, I would say, in the mid-’60s. Women with Ph.D.s from most distinguished universities were being hired, with women’s rights being underlined in the larger society. Of course, women faculty and students in pretty good numbers could be found in nursing and education even before the University made a concerted effort to become more diverse. In my department, I think of women who have contributed so much, especially people like Judith Wilt, Rosemary Bodenheimer, and Mary Crane in particular, each a well-known scholar in her own right. Each has served as chair of the Department as well. The growth of women has given the Department great strength.

Our student population has changed from an all-male, Irish group from Dorchester to a coed group from all over this country and others. Although Boston College is a Catholic university, there has never been a problem in hiring non-Catholics. I believe the mix of Catholics and non-Catholics throughout the University is an interesting reflection of diversity. Parenthetically, I might say here that having a distinguished scholar who happened to be a Catholic would add to the identity question at BC, but hiring a non-Catholic who has the qualifications we need and want is most welcome and gives the whole faculty a wider and richer orientation of belief.

As for enrichment of the arts on campus, one of the perks of being chair of a department was having a colleague, Fr. Frank Sweeney, as sort of chief overseer of the Humanities Series. David Quigley heads the program now and he is a wonderful friend and colleague of mine. Fr. Sweeney was very formal and always called me “Dr. Mahoney.” I never succeeded in having him call me John.

I recall especially two outstanding visitors to Boston College who came at the request of Fr. Sweeney: Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot. Father would generally invite the chair to introduce the speaker. I had the honor of introducing Robert Frost and I believe Maurice Quinlan introduced T.S. Eliot. The Roberts Center was packed for each event. Standing there with a combination of his curmudgeonly ways and soft voice was Robert Frost listening to student questions, each of which wanted an explanation of what certain poems meant, and his saying, “What do you think it means?” He was a good teacher. What a thrill it was for so many who read “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Four Quartets” to have Eliot, the celebrity himself,
lecturing to the University community. Other such greats who were invited to BC and who contributed to the enrichment of the campus were people like Alec Guinness, the actor; the British poet, W.H. Auden; the American poet Robert Lowell; Lillian Hellman, the playwright; and so on, and so on.

I have already mentioned the University Academic Senate, and as the unrest of students was beginning to get stronger, I recall being at a UAS meeting, knowing that Cambodia had been invaded that morning. Students began being more unruly, and went on strike in April of 1969. There was some cancellation of classes, but faculty were in class if any students wanted to come. There was a so-called Hughes Resolution which allowed students to come to class or to have those who chose to miss class opt for a pass/fail grade at the end of the term. Richard Hughes was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for all too short a time, and was a close colleague of mine, as well as being a great 17th century scholar.

I was rather neutral on the elimination of ROTC. We had several University-wide meetings on the issue and at one in particular, I recall Bill Daley of the History department, who had been a prisoner of war in WWII, spoke to a large group favoring our continuation of ROTC.

I like to think of myself as a liberal with a capital L. I like to think of myself as valuing academic life and the order of academic life, and while I sat in my office with students who were not going to class but who were informally eager to talk about the topic of the course, I honored them, but inwardly I yearned for the return of classes. I understood and respected the sense of the students horrified by the kind of war they felt a part of, not because they were fighting, but because they had family and friends who were part of it. Students believed the University should have been more responsive in talking about the violence of the war and what have you.

Over the years, I have been thrilled to have been invited by the Alumni Association to speak to different groups throughout the country. Alumni are always anxious to know what is happening on campus, what are things like these days, what is ahead, and so on. I am always delighted to speak about the institution I love, the faculty I respect, and the alumni who are so wonderful in their connection to Boston College. We, the faculty at Boston College, have always felt as though we are one big family. We are getting larger now, but I believe we can speak out more to parents, friends, alumni, and to one another about what we are doing as a faculty, about what it is like to be a chemist in the 21st century, what our students in nursing are learning about forensic medicine, how teachers of today are prepared for the inner city. Talking to one another in some gatherings now and then might help to maintain that family spirit.

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