Dr. Frank Doe: Reflective Teacher Who Emulates the Ideals of Liberal Education

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Clare Ruedi: Here we go. It is 12:05 PM, on March 29th. Before I begin, Dr. Doe, I would like to ask for your permission to transcribe and deposit this interview to the UD oral history repository. Would that be all right?

Frank Doe: That would be fine by me.

CR: Perfect. Awesome. Then we can begin. I wanted to begin by asking you what your education background is, so we can understand where you are coming from, and then where you are now, in terms of where you came from?

FD: So I was born in Dover, New Hampshire, small town in southern New Hampshire and then right after I was born, pretty much after I was born my folks moved to, family moved to a place outside of Boston. So I went to, unlike most of you, I went to two colleges. They couldn’t take me at the first one I guess but I went to Boston College and Spring Hill College, Boston College obviously in Boston, now a big University. Spring Hill College is a liberal arts college, a Catholic liberal arts college, in Mobile Alabama. So, it was a number of years, a number of years, to get my BS degree in Biology, and then I went in the Seminary for a little while, and then I went to graduate school and got my PhD at graduate school in Biology. So that encompassed many years. I remember my dad asking me at some point in this academic journey of mine...now I remember him...he said “Frank, are you ever going to get a job?”

CR: Oh no, oh no (laughing)

FD: Yeah, so now I can say...after 47 years, “Dad, is that enough? (laughing)

CR: Is that enough? Have I done enough? Rest assured, he’s probably more than happy with what you’ve done, my goodness.

FD: He’d probably say, “You’re a darn fool, for working that long.

CR: Yeah, and for being here as long as you have. That’s so funny. So what brought you to UD then?

FD: After I got my PhD toward the very end, looking for a job of course. So I was looking for a place, three or four things in mind. I was looking for, of course I was looking for an academic job at a college or university. So I wanted it to be a small place, a liberal arts place. I to the University of Wisconsin for one summer, I didn’t include that, it was just one summer. But outside of that I had never been in a big state school. I had always been at a relatively small private, even for my PhD. So I wanted it to be a small college or university, a Catholic school was definitely a plus, not a necessity but a plus. And I wanted to be near a research university, near a research center, because I wanted to get into Genetics and my PhD was more in the cell biology sphere, but Genetics was really my first love. And it’s a long story why I didn’t do it at graduate school, but so I wanted to do a post-doctorate work in Genetics, so I didn’t want to be out in Dinebox, TX, wherever that is, or Oshkosh, Wisconsin wherever that is, out in the middle of
nowhere. I wanted to be near research so I could work with a geneticist. So that was one of the ingredients.

CR: And have you been able to do that while being at UD, proficiently?

FR: Yes, so...small school. Catholic, and I wasn’t married at the time. So I wanted to stay in the United States, but I had been exposed to the South. I like Mobile. I like the warm climate. The older I’ve gotten, the more I’ve like it. So, anyways, small school, Catholic school, and when I got down here Don Cowan who was president at the time. He knew about this...I essentially, unless I had labs in the afternoon, I would teach my classes and then wander off to what is now University of Texas at Dallas. It used to be called the Southwest Center for Advanced Studies. SCAS, decades ago. Great, great think tank for the sciences, Molecular Biology, certain areas of Chemistry, Genealogy, areas of Physics, and Math. And it was funded by the people, the benefactors from TI, Texas Instruments. And when money ran low, the University of Texas took over. So I would teach here in the morning, and then in the afternoons, I would go out there, and then work till 8 or 9 o’clock at night. So I essentially had two jobs. I wasn’t getting paid for the job over there, but the president knew about it and he gave his blessing...And that’s how I learned some Genetics, working with the chairman, the professor; he was just terrific. So that’s why I wound up here.

CR: And is that why you stayed at UD so long? What was something that drew you to UD?

FD: And I’ve said this many times over the last 20 or 30 years. “why, why have you stayed so long?” You know, and the faculty’s nice, some nicer than others, as you would say.

CR: Haha, mm-hhm, yes.

FD: Some easier to get along with and that’s fine. That’s all universities. All faculty is the same way. Some are easier to get along with than others. I don’t have the list. So that’s fine and the administration is fine, fine. No huge problems. “But why did you stay so long, ya know?” And I think it’s very clear why I stayed...(points at Clare Ruedi), people just like you, are here. The students. I think that’s why I stayed. And I’ve told people that...parents...and I’ve been here forever. “So what is it? How come you guys?” I’ve never taught any place else. Maybe, just. I don’t think so, but just maybe wherever I plump down and dealt with young people who are students, maybe I would have liked it there too. But I don’t know. I don’t know. I’ve never done that experiment. I’ve...I’ve only been here. So...but I look at you guys and I say “How come?” And I say “Well...what about the SAT scores or the ACT scores. Well, I say, well, you could’ve gone maybe to Rice or Caltech…and the SAT scores and the ACT scores, I’m sure, would be higher. And that’s probably, that’s probably true. And other universities as well...maybe Trinity. Those scores, those numbers may have been better, and that’s probably true. But then I say, “What else? What is it about you guys, that is not on a numerical scale, and not a test score?” And I look at things like honesty, integrity,
responsibility, charity, cooperativity, humor, common sense...So if you stack all these things up, and people look at you, they look at you, and the UD student is way up there. I’m not sure about students at other places, where they would rank. And then there’s something else too...Sometimes, sometimes you guys don’t come in with these virtues or these characteristics, but before you graduate, you get them, somehow. Humility, also a nice characteristic I find in the students. I think a very important one...and you came in with it, and a lot of your colleagues didn’t (laughing), is work ethic. If you guys don’t have that when you come in, somehow, somewhere, you get it. And it’s so boring, you know if we tell that to admissions. Oh my gosh, that wouldn’t sell. Can you imagine telling high school students, you know, “If you come here, you’re gonna, you’re gonna develop a fantastic work ethic!” Even their parents will say, uhh...But what an important thing...A very important thing. It doesn’t sell, but what an important thing. So, why have you stayed? Well you know better than I do...These are all your buddies.

CR: That’s true. That is more than true. I can attest to the virtues, because I have friends who are just that way.

FD: And hopefully you’re that way.

CR: Hopefully I am. They rub off on me. After four years I have no choice but to become that way. One thing I wanted to ask about...the classroom...you have a distinct way of teaching. Everyone does. And I’m sure you have something to say about what you’ve chosen, how you’ve chosen it as a method of teaching, your preferred style. Any words about that?

FD: Yeah. So in the classroom, of course in seminars it’s a little bit different there. They’re small, interactive. It’s a lot different. In a seminar, you like to get the students...even in a regular class, I get the students involved. But in science, a lot of our classes are lecture-style in the beginning, particularly so. The seminars, with juniors and seniors, are hopefully where we can have a more interactive environment. I’m sure in your courses as well you’ve experienced that.

CR: mm-hmm

FD: So, that’s nice...in small groups. We get in rather deep discussions. And people know something about the material or science. In the other, in the lecture courses, in the core course, I have always used (laughs), I’ve always used transparencies. And I still do. You poor guys, you walk in and these freshmen...they, ya know...they look at that old codger, and look at the...well they never saw one of these overheads, ya know...I got all of these from education. They gave me...I guess nobody uses them anymore.

CR: Uh--huh. Nobody uses them anymore.

FD: They gave me all that stuff.
CR: It closely resembles the back to basics movement there that we talk about a lot in the education department.

FD: So, I always use overheads forever and ever. And I still do. And one of the reasons is, I like to think that what is important, or at least what I think is important…the student hopefully listens. If they are awake, they listen, and they see. I try to write down, and I try to say and explain what I think is important, and then a summary at least of what points they can read. That’s what, that’s what I try to do. You know, you know what’s interesting….and so you’re, you’re gonna be a teacher?

CR: Yes. This coming Fall

FD: God bless ya. It would be hard for me to say anything against that. One of the interesting things I’ve found as a teacher, I’ve got a couple points. Sometimes, because we’re human…sometimes we make mistakes in the classroom. And then we realize we made a mistake. Or a student points it out, very nicely, points out the issue or problem. But we made a mistake. And I found, I found in those classes where I made a mistake…and I don’t do it on purpose, I think I make enough without doing that…I find that when I make a mistake, all of a sudden the class is there, is more, is more with it, than ever. I don’t know why that is…but ya, know…The other thing I found out…it took me many years to know about this…I have, one student in mind, in particular. I can have a class of fifty students, and, I remember I had this one kid…I won’t give you his full name…John…he’s a great guy, but John, who was in Genetics, so General Biology. John..he was just jibber jibber jabber jabber. And very vocal. Extrovert. Nice. He’s a physician now. I remember having him in class. It used to bug the hell out of me. Because he would be jibber jabbering jibber jabbering way over in the corner. And I would get distracted. And all of a sudden I’d think that because my attention to what I was doing and teaching. All of that would get very distracted. Because half of my attention would be saying to John to shut up. Not sure if I ever said it to him. I learned. Maybe somebody pointed it out to me, but I learned “Frank, don’t pay attention to John and what he’s doing, what he’s not doing. You have forty nine kids in this class who are really attentive, and who wanna learn this stuff. So your job is to teach them. Concentrate on them and not the one person who’s distracting you for one reason or another. It took me a long time to learn that very simple thing. But it’s true. It’s true.

FD: And then again I learned the hard way. It was another year, wasn’t the same guy. I won’t use his name, and he’s turned out really well. He was a freshman lab assistant. This gal Donna was one of my lab assistants, junior or senior biology or chemistry major. And this other guy was in General Biology, and he kept begging Donna for a date. He wanted to go out with her. And that’s fine, you know I, I don’t interfere with you guys. I don’t even know what’s going on, unless I see you all ‘luvvy duvvy’ in the parking lots. It’s none of my business. So it was up to Donna, the young lady, and what she wanted. She got a kick outta it actually. But, he didn’t study. He didn’t study. And he’d come in and say Dr. Doe…Dr. Doe…and I got very frustrated with him because he was making no progress. He didn’t seem to want to learn, and ya know, I just got frustrated with him. And I told him…I’ve never done this…I never did this before, and I have not done this
since. I said his name, and I said, “I never want you to darken the door to my office ever again. He didn’t. I just…it’s something that should never be said to anyone. I mean, what right does ANYone of us have to give up on somebody else? So I really regret that. When I see him again, he’s on my list, to say I’m sorry about that. So, anyway, he’s done fine. He’s doing okay, in spite of…

FD: And I’ll tell somebody else and they may say, “Well Frank, you gotta look at it...maybe that really helped him”, and that doesn’t make me feel any better cause I still, I don’t think I had a right to say that to him. But I’m more hopeful now than ever. Another guy, completely different student—his name was Ollie. He came in after the first exam, again this was twenty or thirty years ago...he came in after the first General Biology exam, and he said he did poorly. (laughing) I remember, he came in not to argue, and he had his exam with him, and he got a thirty six percent on the first General Biology exam. That was far below average. Now a lot of students don’t do well on that. But that was well below average. Thirty-six percent. And he, he came in and he stood there, and he held his paper up, and he said, non-accusatory, “Dr. Doe, this will never never happen again”. I said, “Okay Ollie”...It never never never happened again! And he went to Southwestern Medical School, and he’s now a physician.

CR: Wow...oh my goodness! How beautiful! That’s like a dream come true for a teacher. These are some really good stories...so I know that you obviously spend a lot of time with students—that’s been shown here and there again, especially even by my cousin, who talks to me about that...and how much time with spend with pre-health, pre-med students. You advise them. How did you get into that area at this university?

FD: When I came here in 1969, not 1869 as you think...

CR: (laughing) Nooo...

FD: I came here in 1969...there were three of us in the department at that point. Sister Cledovia Locket was chairman, and Warren Peelage a birdman, an ornithologist was here, and I was the third one, faculty member in Biology. Sister Cledovia handled the pre-med, pre-dent, pre-health professions at that time. And then she passed away, I’ll never forgive her for dying. (laughing) She passed away in her eighties, in ninety-four, in July of ninety-four she passed away. I helped out with pre-med advising. Billie Graham was the fourth faculty member who came on well after I did; he helped out with pre-med advising. So we got to know a lot about it. Sister Clo was an exemplary teacher, and adviser, researcher, the whole can of worms. And so, Bill and I learned from her unofficial mentorship about advising, and about the medical professions. When she passed away...she should have passed away on the job...students kept coming to us. No one ever talked to Bill or myself. There was no administrative “do you guys want to take over?” No. None of that. Students just kept coming into the office. But, you know, Sister had unfortunately passed away, but they kept coming into the office, and they would come to see Bill and myself. That sounds like UD.

CR: Uh-huh, that’s what I was just about to say. The spirit of UD. There you have it.
FD: It sounds like UD, you know, unofficial… and then Bill passed away at fifty-three, fifty-four years old from a form of cancer. So that’s how I got the job.

CR: Wonderful.

FD: No one else picked it.

CR: No one else chose it. It was thrust upon them.

FD: The students just kept coming.

CR: For good reason… now we are rated really high on a list of pre-med, pre-health programs, yes?

FD: Yeah, yep…

CR: What do you enjoy most about advising the students who come through your office, needing advice?

FD: One of the things I most appreciate is when they come back. And a lot of them take a gap year after being students. But I appreciate their informing us that they’ve been successful, that they’ve gotten into medical school, they’ve gotten into dental school, physician’s assistant, PT, nursing school. We really appreciate them coming back and telling us in their own way… saying thank you… that’s a neat part of the job. And so many of them are successful because… they have developed those nice qualities that I mentioned earlier… but a work ethic to succeed. And they succeed in professional school. And I adore it. The older I’ve gotten, the more I appreciate teaching. I don’t know what it is. And the more I appreciate teaching and the more I appreciate advising these young people… And you know, with a little bit of practice, and grace, after a while, the words automatically come out. Sometimes I wonder, “Where did that come from?” I think God’s grace. It comes. I hope so.

CR: I know so. And of course, you, just like the students, are as virtuous as them…

FD: (laughing) Oh, I didn’t say that.

CR: We can’t be formed by non-virtuous people, we have to be formed by virtuous people as well, to become who we are supposed to be.

CR: One thing I had a question about is how the core curriculum has affected your biology students, if you’ve seen that it has affected them and their repertoire of knowledge, expertise in the field… what it gives them…

FD: We talk a lot about that at UD, trying to advertise about the core and the liberal arts education. And of course, I include, as most people do, science as part of the liberal arts. So we have the humanities and the sciences. One of the things that I see in our science
majors, in particular biology and biochemistry…these are the people I get to know best. They learn how to write. I hope they do, because the humanities teachers (laughing) require a lot of writing for you young guys…

CR: For sure

FD: And, and it works…they don’t learn to write as well as the people I see in Basic Ideas, for some reason or another. And I guess one would expect, you see English majors and you think, well shouldn’t they write better? They should write better. You see philosophy majors, and shouldn’t they write better? They should probably write better. You see, some of these other disciplines probably require more writing, undoubtedly, than we do, in science. But anyways, it really helps science majors. They hardly write sentences, and you see later on, how most of them improved greatly. So I see that.

FD: You know, as you have said this, a lot of our students are pre-meds. One of our pre-meds, Kathleen Widdington...a number of years ago, a bright gal, she came through here, one of her sisters was an education major, as a teacher...anyway, Kathleen said when she went to medical school...well how did her UD education help? Well the first years of med school have changed a little bit...back when she went to med school, lots and lots of facts, photographic memory...(aside) so jealous of those people. Kathleen said those first two years...UD education, did it help? Yeah, she was appreciative of all the science...blah blah blah...But you know, multiple choice tests, that sort of thing...we’re not big on those at UD in most courses. Don’t get a lot of practice...Yeah, yeah it helped. She appreciated.

FD: But she said when she got to third year, her UD education...liberal arts education...really came to the floor when she dealt with folks, when she dealt with patients and had to draw on all the information, or some of the information, that she learned in her first two years. She said she was able to do that. She was able to integrate. She had people skills. I don’t know if we teach that at UD. Can it be taught? I don’t know.

CR: (laughing)

FD: You guys in education can talk about that. I don’t know. But, she said that her third year when she dealt with patients, when she was out in the clinics, she thought her UD education somehow really helped her over the education in other schools.

CR: Interesting.

FD: Another student...these are concrete and special examples...one of the students came from Wisconsin a number of years ago...Tom was a biochemistry major here. Grade Point Average not very competitive. About a 3.1. Good GPA, but for medical school, not competitive. But he had a fantastic MCAT score. He just blew it out of the water. One of the highest we had seen at that time. So the med schools would say what’s going on? And you know, I know what they are thinking...when you see a high MCAT
score, and low grades, you say...lazy. Anyway, that’s the conclusion. And they’re not to
keen on that. He tried for fifteen years to get into medical school. Fifteen years. He didn’t
apply every year, but every other year, he applied fifteen years later... He worked in
computers, made some money, became a Texas resident...He did some things, but he
went for an interview at Texas Tech for med school. And when he walked into the
interview, there was something on the monitor, and the interviewer had a painting up, a
photo, on the computer. He had been looking at it. And it wasn’t a set up deal. He was
engrossed in this painting and Tom walked in for his interview, and the guy said, “have
you ever seen this before?” And I don’t know whether it was Picasso or Remoire...I
don’t know what it was...and Tom said, “Yeah, yeah I’ve seen that, and the artist is blah
blah blah blah blah...” And he started talking about the painting. I’m convinced, I’m
convinced, that guy was impressed. And Tom got into Texas Tech med school and did
fine. And he’s a physician.

CR: That’s a neat story.

FD: So when I hear pre-med students say, “Aww geez, we’ve got to take this fine arts
course”...I mean, it’s a great course to take in Rome, I don’t hear that from people who
have gone to Rome... (laughing)

CR: (laughing) Yeah, yeah stop complaining, right?

FD: I never hear it if they’ve gone to Rome...but sometimes I hear it if they are here. I
often tell them that story.

CR: I’m sure that changes their mind on some things...

FD: So sometimes there’s some very practical aspects too...of learning this stuff

CR: Certainly. Now you were the dean of Constantin College at one point, yes?

FD: Yeah. Five years.

CR: Five years?

FD: Yes. I was the first dean of Constantin College.

CR: Were you?

FD: We didn’t have one; we didn’t have a dean of Constantin College until then.

CR: What brought you to that position?

FD: The administration.

CR: (laughing)
I did not want it. Glen Perot called me and said “we would like you to be the Dean of Constantin College”…I said no, because we have too many administrators now. And it’s costing us too much money. We have too many people in administration. So no.

That’s a bold statement.

And he said, “Well Frank,…” He said, “Look, if you don’t take it, I’m gonna give it to somebody else…” So he said we’re gonna spend this money. Well, I had no answer for that. So I said okay, I’ll do the best I can. And, Edna…I don’t know if you know Edna…she is fantastic.

That’s a bold statement.

And I had two associate deans…Claudia, who was getting or had her PhD from the institute of philosophical studies here…and then Kathleen came in. Great associates. And you know what was eye-opening to me…probably not eye-opening to you students, but it was to me…see I’ve been affiliated…a lot of my connections were with biology majors, biochemistry majors…and in general, after freshman year, pretty focused bunch. Pre-meds, pre-dents…didn’t have major problems. If they did have major problems, they didn’t tell me, because they wanted to get into professional school. But all of a sudden in that job, I saw lots and lots of students who had issues. Who had real problems. And there were things that were probably going on…suicide, kids attempting suicide…I don’t think anybody succeeded in those five years. So depression. Girls being stalked. Pregnancy issues. Parental questions…and anyway, one thing after another.

So Dr. Cowan, the early president, had once said, in writing maybe, that the University of Dallas…we all need to accept normal students, normal people. I think I believed that, until I got into that job. And then I said, “No, that’s not true. We have kids who have lots and lots of problems. Just like out there in society. We’re not immune. That was a real eye-opener. One of the best things that we did, Claudia and myself and Kathleen who was admin…we got from Jan a number of students who hadn’t graduated…they were missing two or three courses, and some of them hadn’t graduated for some time…we got a list, and we contacted those people. We said, “Let’s get their degree finished. Let’s finish it up. Let’s see what we can do.” We contacted some teachers, see if we can take these two or three courses, and make arrangements. So we had a number of students who finished their degrees during this.

That’s a really neat project to take on.

Yeah, yeah…it’s so frustrating…for them, and for the registrar…(laughing)

(laughing)…

To have these people…for one reason or another.

Wow. That’s a pretty neat experience you had then, as a dean.
FD: Yeah, it was for the most part, it had its rocky bumps, but that’s what happens when you become an administrator.

CR: Yeah, you do a lot of the excess work, out of class work…One thing I was wondering as you’re talking about it…it seems that you’re very personable when you teach. And it led me to think about your personal life and how teaching has affected your personal life, or how being dean has affected you personally…

FD: My wife and two daughters…I can’t remember anything negative…they are always so encouraging. If I have to come in on a Saturday or Sunday or get up early for my eight o’clock classes, and get dressed in the dark, I never got any static in my life about that. I think part of it…they have a high respect for education. I think that’s part of it. And what we do in the colleges and universities, they respect.

FD: Well I’ll tell you what…the first number of years I was here, I really didn’t appreciate what I was doing. I didn’t really appreciate my family, and I didn’t appreciate teaching or doing research. Because I got drunk everyday. And students really helped me through this in their own way. But a number of people on campus and a large number of people off campus, and the grace of God…after a number of years here, I got sober. It changed my life. That was a…that still is a game changer. So fortunately no one ever told me what I told that student. None of those people ever told me I was hopeless. So if anybody ever listens to this tape, and have any kind of addiction…they should be…hopeful. There is hope here. June of ninety-seven…That was a big day, a big month…

FD: I think we better quit.

CR: I think that’s a good idea. I think we did good here. Thank you so much for everything.

FD: Good seeing you!

CR: Thank you for listening to my questions and hearing them and then responding so lovely. It was a good time today.