Interview with ACPA--College Student Educators International Executive Director, Cindi Love

Frank Shushok, Jr., Virginia Tech
Cindi Love shares her colorful work history—from working with African American students in Louisiana during desegregation to creating an INC 500 company—and her overriding commitment to human dignity throughout.

By Cindi Love

Interview with ACPA–College Student Educators International Executive Director, Cindi Love

SHUSHOK: Welcome, Dr. Love, and thank you for all you are doing for ACPA in your role as Executive Director. From our time together, I’ve come to appreciate the great diversity of activity your professional life has encompassed. I have the sense that your career has unfolded in unexpected ways. Could you share with readers the highlights of your journey and what moments, in retrospect, were most monumental in forming the person you are today?

LOVE: This is my 40th year of work as a degreed professional, and since coming to ACPA I’ve really been tuned in to the issues of recruitment, retention, and completion and what a degree really means as well as how people translate that achievement into daily work. When I think back 40 years, I intended to be a speech pathologist. I was very interested in working with autistic and aphasic children and adults. I finished college when I was 20 and moved to Louisiana, where our city was in the middle of federally mandated desegregation. They had not complied with the intent of the Civil Rights Act and its related regulations regarding public education and because of that the school year start was postponed. When I was finally notified to come to school, I arrived at a campus where all of the teachers had walked out. There were 600 children on campus, predominantly African American, who had been brought into that setting for the first time in their lives. An African American principal was there with all of the children and no teachers, pretty much alone. This was a unionized environment, and I didn’t have any experience with that either. When I think back 40 years, I intended to be a speech pathologist. I was very interested in working with autistic and aphasic children and adults. I finished college when I was 20 and moved to Louisiana, where our city was in the middle of federally mandated desegregation. They had not complied with the intent of the

Telephone lines had been cut, so we gathered children in the cafeteria and kept them occupied until their parents could be notified that the kids could be taken home. This principal said to me, “Your fellow teachers are going to hate you because you crossed

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union lines today.” I don’t think I understood the implications of that statement until later when our house and car were vandalized. He was correct: it was a tense year for me with other teachers. These children had arrived in school that day to do the one thing they thought they were supposed to do—come to school and learn—and most of the adults had walked out on them. I didn’t want to be part of a system that would leave kids feeling abandoned.

About mid-way through the year, the Director of Special Education approached me and said, “We’d like to promote you to supervisor.” I think the only reason was that I had more college credits than anyone else did at that point. So at 20 years of age, in a totally unfamiliar setting, I was in charge of a team of 55 folks. Nothing prepared me for that.

Over the next couple of years, Public Law 94–142, which passed in 1975, was being implemented. The provision called “Child Find” called for children to be identified all over the country who had never entered public schools due to what were called “catastrophic disabilities.” Kids who faced profound physical and intellectual challenges were brought into school for the first time. As part of my job, I went out into rural Louisiana, into areas where there were no paved highways, in many cases no sewer systems, and extreme poverty beyond anything I had ever seen or experienced in my life. The majority of my client families were people of color. I went out to these homes to identify these children, do the assessments, and talk to the parents and provide them with their rights for the identified child. But, there were many children in each family and more than one had deep needs, as did their families. I found myself struggling to establish the boundaries of the job I had been asked to do. Our church got involved to provide additional services and study the Bible with them. One woman started coming to our church and bringing her four children, and I was excited to see her getting more support. But, then a member of our church turned her into Child Protective Services, claiming that she was an inadequate mother. She came to church and didn’t have enough diapers, didn’t have enough food for the kids, and the children weren’t always clean. Those children were removed from her home for two years. I felt responsible for bringing that woman and her family into an environment that was hostile to them.

I worked for two years to get those children restored to their home, and I realized that what my own experience had taught me was helpful was in fact deeply harmful. It was a moment of deep introspection and it changed the way I thought about what I would now call white privilege and power. At that time, I didn’t have the words for it.

During that same time, I had a fellowship with a Veterans Administration Hospital, so I was also working with Vietnam vets, the majority of whom were paraplegic or quadriplegic in addition to having speech and language challenges due to head injuries. There were extreme challenges in reintegrating them into their homes. I found myself once again interacting with a population of human beings in a huge, bureaucratic system—the Department of Veterans Affairs—where I experienced again that if you are on the “other side” of the power system, the privilege system, and your level of vulnerability is profound, the odds of you being abused will actually go up. That was really frightening to me—that the most vulnerable people in the world could actually be the people who are most abused, often by the people who are supposedly trying to help them.

We moved back to Texas after that, and I went back to work at a rehabilitation agency where I did my student training. My husband and I divorced, and I had to make more money because I had a child with difficulties, and medical care was expensive. So I started a little company back then that was doing the first systems-integration of personal computers into the rehabilitation world. I was very fortunate that work grew and a company grew out of that. It became an INC 500 company, one of the fastest growing private companies in North America. I was named to a group called “The Birthing of Giants” at M.I.T., in collaboration with the Young Entrepreneur’s Organization (YEO) and Inc. magazine. Fifty of us were named the top entrepreneurs in North America.

So, I went to this incredible training at MIT and learned a whole new definition of myself in that

DR. CINDI LOVE serves as Executive Director of ACPA—College Student Educators International, a post she assumed on July 1, 2014. Prior to her current appointment, Love served as the chief executive officer of two multinational nonprofit organizations as well as Executive Director of Corporate and Continuing Education at Brookhaven College with the Dallas County Community College District. Earlier in her career, Love was a senior executive with the TORO Company (NYS: TTC) and an award-winning founding entrepreneur of eight corporations. Love is known for her strategic thinking, business acumen, and her tireless commitment to social justice work, especially in the context of higher education. Executive Editor Frank Shushok Jr. sat down with Cindi Love for the following interview on March 13, 2015.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (aboutcampus@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.
there’s a strong pro-narrative about Israel. I’m not only what I had been told and taught growing up in the world. Without that experience, I would have known of what was actually playing out in that part of the world. It awakened in me a whole other understanding of life between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the most oppressed people in that region of the world, were being marginalized, including in the United States. My denomination, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches was called, “the first gay church” and “the church with AIDS” because so many members identified as LGBT and members helped so many people during the AIDS crisis. I worked for MCC for five years. Then I was asked to come to Soulforce, a group that is trying to amend practices that are discriminatory toward LGBT people on college campuses, particularly when religious belief is at the core of that discrimination. I did that work until March 2014 and soon, thereafter, came to ACPA. I encountered so many professionals in student learning and development, in student affairs, on college campuses who had a deep desire to ensure that every person has a safe and brave place. Their commitment drew me. That’s why I’m here.

SHUSHOK: Your passion for justice, as well as for peace and reconciliation, are overwhelmingly apparent. Raising issues of injustice, posing difficult questions, and staying in relationship with people with whom you disagree appears to be a particular strength for you. I’m hoping you can offer counsel to readers who are interested in being both a social justice advocate and a proponent for peace and reconciliation.

LOVE: Two things helped me in my lifetime. One was a really deep assessment of what it means to lead with integrity, and I think each human being has to evaluate this individually. Leading with integrity has always meant to me that you can’t ignore that something is really wrong with the system, a product, or your delivery. Your responsibility as a leader is not only knowing these things, but also systematically addressing them. I participated in a training program with a person who asked us, “What do you know that you are not saying? What do you know right now

environment. There were some things I didn’t really like about it; of the 50 of us, only three of us were women. Back then, as you can imagine, no one identified as gay. There were no people of color. That power brokering system took me out of relationships with the people I had learned to care about—the most vulnerable people in society.

In spite of that truth, I continued being what I call a “conspicuous consuming capitalist.” Ultimately, I established eight companies. A Fortune 500 company, TORO, bought one. I had a “golden handcuff” agreement with them. I had to stay there five years so I wouldn’t compete with them. I was in this position of enormous privilege and power—there’s no other way to define that. In my very first meeting with the senior executive team, of which I was a part, they had this section in the meeting called the “bring up,” where people could tell each other things they were concerned about. My brother had died in 1988 of AIDS, so I wanted that group to participate in the Minnesota AIDS walk together and challenge each other financially to match what our employees raised. One senior executive of the company said to me, “There are no people at TORO who have AIDS.” I responded, “There are families of these employees who have AIDS. I am part of your team and my brother died of AIDS in 1988.” In the end, they participated and I like to believe it helped change some part of the culture of the company. When I retired from TORO in 2000, the senior executive who initially had reservations gave me the Tiffany AIDS Heart. I felt like while I was there, even though I was a “conspicuous consuming capitalist,” and did have enormous power and privilege, there was something I could do to change the balance of power and to be supportive.

After that, I became a chief operating officer for a robotics firm in Tel-Aviv, Israel. We sourced components from across the border. Our support people, the most oppressed people in that region of the world, were building the parts that we then purchased, brought into Israel for assembly, and imported to the United States. I had a lot of opportunity to observe the conditions of life between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and it awakened in me a whole other understanding of what was actually playing out in that part of the world. Without that experience, I would have known only what I had been told and taught growing up in a southern, Christian, evangelical environment where there’s a strong pro-narrative about Israel. I’m not sure I would have known that there was actually a whole other story that needed to be understood.

I made a decision that I was going to leave corporate, for-profit work; I was finished with that in my lifetime. I was going to go back to non-profit work, preferably to higher education where the next generations of thought leaders are engaged in understanding the world. I was able to find a place at Brookhaven College in Dallas, Texas. The Dallas County Community College System served about 175,000 students on an annual basis across seven campuses. Half of my division students did not speak English as their primary language, and represented over 55 nations. I still believe the work I did to help young adults navigate difference in that system in the three years I was in Brookhaven may have been the best work of my life.

Right after that, my church called and asked if I would be willing to come and serve on their board and as their executive director. At that time, 96 nations in the world still had anti-LGBT regulations and laws. You could be arrested or imprisoned for up to 14 years or be killed for openly identifying yourself as gay. Around the world, the lives of LGBT people were being marginalized, including in the United States. My denomination, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches was called, “the first gay church” and “the church with AIDS” because so many members identified as LGBT and members helped so many people during the AIDS crisis. I worked for MCC for five years. Then I was asked to come to Soulforce, a group that is trying to amend practices that are discriminatory toward LGBT people on college campuses, particularly when religious belief is at the core of that discrimination. I did that work until March 2014 and soon, thereafter, came to ACPA. I encountered so many professionals in student learning and development, in student affairs, on college campuses who had a deep desire to ensure that every person has a safe and brave place. Their commitment drew me. That’s why I’m here.

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that you are not doing anything about, that you know will bring harm to innocent people?” It’s frustrating work. Every day, you have to balance the things that you know are not right, pick something off that list, and do something intentional about it. As a manager, I know that this can be frustrating for employees. They have a list of things within their job description that they are supposed to be doing, and these other things that need to be done, the justice seeking “over the mountain” are more aspirational. One of the challenges for higher education is that those aspirations are what we hope people integrate into their hearts, souls, and minds and want to do something about. But in fact, the majority of our time is taken up with either crisis management or trying to get the system to work for the largest number of people.

I’m also a practitioner of nonviolence. Those principles require me to stay in the room with people who may vehemently disagree with me and work to establish a dialogue. When you lean into this process with another human being, you don’t use your energy to get your point across, and you are not caught up in trying to win or feel superior. It changes the way you work. When I get upset, I have to sit down and figure out what is stopping me from being able to create dialogue with the person with whom I disagree. Over time, I’ve learned that it’s always some part of myself that still has a sense of inadequacy.

So those two things—learning to lead with integrity and keeping your relationships with other people whole—are adopted ways of life that I can recommend. Your blood pressure will be lower, you will have a lot more energy, and your life will be fuller.

SHUSHOK: On several occasions I’ve heard you differentiate between the terms “advocate” and “activist.” Can you share the ways these concepts differ? In your view, what is the right balance or approach to enacting these ideas when working with students on college and university campuses?

LOVE: There is a continuum between social justice educators, social justice advocates, and social justice activists. We talk about translating scholarship into practice, and for the majority that means reading about best practices on how to get people engaged in inter-group dialogue and creating a project or program that brings people together according to that research. Then we assess what we did and how it moved things forward.

Then there’s advocacy, which is where it gets challenging for us. We have campuses all over the country right now that just live through, and are still living through, some of the most significant racial tension in their history since the Civil Rights Act. Students are deeply angry and depressed and want to protest on campus. Even though we had all the right education about race and race theory, when we reached this boiling point, we discovered that a lot of what we were doing in an educational context did not feel supportive, did not feel integrated, and did not feel inclusive to the students who were traumatized. And that’s when people struggle with this question: “Am I an educator, or am I an advocate?”

When ACPA went to Ferguson and to the Saint Louis campus to film “Confronting the Reality of Racism in the Academy,” social justice education was clearly at the heart of the university and its mission, but there were deep, deep challenges. Professionals were questioning if they should show up to these “protest” events with students and stand in solidarity with them. They were wondering how to respond when students came into their office and said they wanted to protest, not go to class, and not take their finals. Employees of all types were navigating their own fear, frustration, and anger and what they could do within the context of their professional responsibilities while honoring the academic institution where they work.

When you move from education to advocacy to activism, you are giving voice to the struggle and you are doing something “active” to amplify and mobilize the issues. This work is still largely undefined territory for the field of student affairs. When you push from education to advocacy all the way over to activism, you may be engaging in nonviolent resistance, civil disobedience, and social action. The majority of people I’ve encountered in student affairs do not have any experience with this part of the trajectory of human rights and insistence on human dignity, so they struggle when it happens on their campus.

SHUSHOK: Thanks for that insight. This gives us much to consider. I’d like to change directions and talk about what you’re learning in your new role. In concluding your first year as Executive Director ACPA—College Student Educators International, you’ve had the opportunity to gain a high level perspective of higher education, particularly as it relates the experience of students. What have you seen that has concerned you? What has afforded you hope?

LOVE: I am deeply concerned about the institutional, instructional, and compositional racism that I see on campuses. People of color are often “minorities” in their divisions, and recruiting practices don’t bring as many people to the table as we need for our society to evolve. The majority of administrators in public higher education, as well as on the boards of trustees, continue to be white and likely identify as male and as heterosexual. We have to shake this ratio up if we are really going to meet the needs of the next generation, which is much more integrated and much less tolerant...
of our generational resistance to eliminate power and privilege. We have to start shifting some of those administrative hierarchies, and it can’t just be about filling slots or ticking off numbers. It has to be genuine, deep respect among colleagues.

I’m also concerned about the financial picture for higher education. The funding model is upside down, and the knee-jerk reaction is to deal with that ratio quickly to shore up our net revenue base and keep our debt ratings solid. These quick decisions we will make are typically not very good ones. We are going to have to be a lot more creative and innovative to sustain the type of quality experience we want for our students. Higher education is disintermediating as many industries have done in the last 50 years. We are not well prepared because many of our institutions do not have sufficient endowments.

I am concerned about student affairs professionals, who absolutely must be willing to provide evidence of the impact of their work on the outcomes for students. We must provide compelling evidence of the direct correlation of student affairs work to the completion agenda. I hear a lot of people complain: “There are all kinds of meetings that don’t include us. Faculty don’t like us. Administrators don’t support us and don’t really know what we do. They are consolidating our divisions.” We need to demonstrate our value not worry about whether we are being valued or we will be left outside the circle of influence. We have amazing people in student affairs assessment. If we can just deploy our talent to assess our own impact, then I think we will see over the next 20 years a formalization of the field of student affairs within the academic disciplines. Our work will be understood as central to the completion agenda. In order to do that, we have to develop productive relationships with people across all divisions on campus.

I’m extremely hopeful about the next generation. It’s going to take some major changes in our way of thinking and acting, but I’m hopeful that we have the capacity and the willingness to deal with one another respectfully, to challenge our own assumptions, to validate our work with appropriate assessment and, above all, to care deeply about the assertion of human dignity in everything we do.

**SHUSHOK:** As you know, advancing student learning is the mission of About Campus. Thus, we’re always interested in perspectives that help educators nurture the most robust conditions for learning on college and university campuses. What thoughts do you have about this sort of work? Where should we focus our attention? You’ve talked about things like creative strategies and thinking differently. I’m wondering if you could offer some generalizable but practicable things that the typical About Campus reader, no matter what seat they sit in on their college campus, can do to help move some of these things forward?

**LOVE:** No matter where you are sitting, you can invest time and energy in the study of what happens when an individual decides that the need to win or to prevail in a given situation is greater than maintaining the dignity of the human beings involved. That for me is a daily practice. I think we are desperate, as a society and as a world, for that level of introspection.

Second, learning to communicate within the principles of nonviolence engages people in deep listening and the consideration of where they can come together rather than where they are apart. The more we can shift our thinking and our communication away from deficit models, the more likely we are to move forward.

The third thing is that it is really important for people to understand is their impact and what they are trying to accomplish. If you don’t maintain some kind of big picture and instead focus on the job description or what you have to get done that day, it’s easy to lose sight of the assertion of human dignity as central to our work. We see this problem when we work so hard for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and then when something blows up, we say, “How did we miss that? Why wasn’t that on the list?” Well, it’s not about the list. It’s about focusing on human dignity instead of just showing up and accomplishing tasks.

Finally, we need to quit complaining. I hear a lot of people say, “You know we are not valued.” We need to stop this behavior. We need to show up and talk about our value in the context of students and their learning. I believe this will make a big difference.

**SHUSHOK:** Cindi, this has been such an edifying and thought-provoking conversation. I regret we’re out of time. I know that I’ve learned a lot and have much to think about. I truly appreciate your leadership, the diversity of your experiences, and the ways that you will continue to shape and challenge higher education. I’m grateful for your time today.

**LOVE:** Thank you very much, Frank. I appreciate the voice of About Campus. I read every issue front to cover. I’ve enjoyed our time together very much.