March, 2018

Wake Forest Provost Rogan Kersh talks with About Campus Executive Editor, Frank Shushok, Jr.

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Wake Forest University’s Rogan Kersh Talks with Executive Editor Frank Shushok, Jr. about How Students Are His Best Guides as Teacher and Provost

Shushok: I’d like to begin our conversation with a more personal angle. I’m asking people I interview how they’ve changed. I’d value you reflecting about the ways the 20-year-old Rogan is different than the 30-year-old Rogan and the Rogan I’m interviewing today. What are the most salient lessons growing older has taught you?

Kersh: It’s such an intriguing question, and I’d like to hope that a life lesson that most of us pick up along the way, and that’s been manifestly true for me, is that I’ve become a lot more pragmatic. The 20-year-old me (and many college sophomores in general) saw the world as a very binary place. It was—fill in your cliché—Montagues or Capulets, light or dark, zero or one. I was Manichean—binary—on so many issues; the answer was clearly one or another. The world is actually incredibly layered and complex; the simple, obvious, direct solutions generally aren’t. As a 20- or even a 35-year-old, I wanted to summit the mountain or vanquish the foe. Now I find it remarkably fulfilling to move things a little this way or that way, to connect this person to that person so maybe the two of them together can begin to see the outline of a solution to something or promote an innovation that enhances a few lives in a worthy way. We tend to traffic in such superlatives and hyperbolic extremes, and most of life is lived, I think to have fruitful meaning, a step at a time.

Occasionally I have a conversation (figuratively speaking) with my 18-year-old self: I’m now Provost where I was an undergraduate, and my office window
looks directly across our quad into the window of my freshman residence-hall room. There are times I imagine the 18-year-old me looking back at me today. The things I want to say to that younger self are not “strive more” or “become greater;” it’s more like, “It’s going to be okay. Embrace a sense of possibility and don’t lose your intellectual curiosity. The things you are striving for now will be very different from the sources of fulfillment and happiness someday.” I think that’s what I’ve absorbed along the way. It could be a white flag of surrender, but I find contentment, happiness, and fulfillment in relatively small ways. I think it’s coming to peace with the enormity of it all.

**Small Steps Make a Big Difference**

IN MANY WAYS, it is like the awesome responsibility of being in a classroom with these amazing young minds. I’m not going to strike some extraordinary blow that will realign the atoms of the universe, as I imagine that my young self aspired to do. Perhaps I’ve learned the great American philosophical virtue—pragmatism. Try something, move a little in this direction. If it doesn’t work, come back and try an incremental move another way. It was this philosophy that undergirded the New Deal, it was this philosophy that undergirded Abraham Lincoln’s “feel his way through” approach to the Civil War and the rest of his presidency. I think the notion that life is best lived as a series of mighty achievements or rungs achieved on a ladder, or in a more Millennial argot, in footholds on a mountain you’re climbing fast, is a tough way to go through life. What you’ll find is that there’s always another rung and there’s always another foothold to reach for—always another blow to strike. And often none of those rungs or footholds or blows struck are all that satisfying, because there’s always going to be a next one. Over time, gratefully, I’ve learned to find satisfaction both in the moment and in those smaller, pragmatic moves that you can, if necessary, move back from and try a different direction. This feels like a more forgiving universe or society. There’s a lot of room to try a little bit one way and recognize when it might not be working and be content with that reality.

**Shushok:** As we’ve gotten to know each other this semester, you’ve shared with me about your journey to college. I know our readers would appreciate learning about your background, your pathway to college, and what’s happened between then and becoming provost?

**The Magic of Higher Education**

**Kersh:** Oh gracious—I had an episodic upbringing. I was born into a kind of privilege and status that I think needs to be acknowledged. My dad was the art director for *Life Magazine,* and my mom was a medical professional, a nurse in Greenwich Village in New York City. It was a glorious place to be as a kid. Our family, however, took a lot of twists and turns, many of them downward. We wound up in financial straits. My father became ill for an extended period; we moved around a lot before we wound up in the mountains of North Carolina. By junior high, through various financial mismanagements, things hadn’t worked out so well. Eventually my mother left the family, and my dad was trying to raise four kids on his own. I eventually ended up living with a different family to finish high school. I’m grateful to them for being a source of refuge and comfort. By the time I came to Wake Forest, whatever veneer I might have had as a Greenwich Village kid was well washed away. I was a kid from the North Carolina Mountains with limited resources who needed a scholarship to even go to college. I actually had little expectation or awareness of higher
education—neither of my parents had been to college. My dad worked his way up from an office boy at *Life Magazine* to art director (which was possible in his generation, although not so likely now, a sort of a sad commentary on the diminished mobility of the United States). I feel enormously fortunate to have landed at Wake Forest, as it expanded my horizons. I just felt like it was a magical place of possibility and learning, and it rekindled the intellectual curiosity that had faded through the tougher times of my childhood.

I never had a career plan and I am ashamed to confess it. Truthfully, I backed my way into graduate school. I loved politics, so I figured I’d find a job in Washington, DC. I got advice to find someone I admired and learn about their path. That sounded like good counsel, and I found a couple of folks who were committee directors in the Senate, where I had worked for a while in an intern capacity. Since both these people had graduate degrees in political science, I thought getting a PhD could be something fun to do—and then come back and be a committee director on Capitol Hill. That was my ambition; I wasn’t well schooled on how grad school worked, and I thought I could pick up a PhD in a couple years. I was lucky enough to back my way into a fellowship since I couldn’t afford it otherwise. I bounced around for years trying to figure out graduate school—my training hadn’t really been in the PhD direction. I was interested in practical politics, so I was way behind a lot of my academic cohort who at 22, 23, and 24 were clear about wanting to be a professor, then a dean, and perhaps a college president.

It all felt like going to another planet and doing things that didn’t involve the laws of gravity. Finishing a PhD seemed impossible at first. Although I felt lucky to be in graduate school, I also felt like I should scuttle back to Washington. My fellowship’s condition was that I not teach the first three years, so I didn’t find my way to the classroom until my fourth year of graduate school. It was there that I suddenly felt like I knew where I belonged. The work was terrifying at first; I felt at my early 20s barely a step ahead of my students, but it was enormously rewarding, even if the anxiety part of it took years to dispel. No one in my world was an academic except for my teachers at Wake Forest; they seemed like Olympian Gods who lived on some high mountain and ate ambrosia, not like something I could become. I really went through some winters of the spirit in graduate school at first, but eventually found the classroom was a wonderfully rewarding place and thought I’d love to teach at a university. I felt incredibly fortunate to be in a classroom with amazing students and to have time to look into questions that interested me in the politics and public-policy space.

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### The Value of Administrative Work

YEARS LATER I CAME INTO University Administration. Candidly, I didn’t like administrative work at first, and I couldn’t figure out what was fulfilling about these duties. I knew what it felt like to teach a class successfully (single class, and an entire semester’s worth of classes). I knew what was fulfilling and rewarding, and what was meaningful and contributory about teaching. Even though I don’t think many people, academics or otherwise, actually like the work of writing, we love having written. Slogging through the research and writing, however, results in an article or book, and perhaps influence on something about politics or policy. I had no idea what was fulfilling about academic administration. It took me months before I figured that out.

Returning to your first question, I had to learn to find real meaning wherever I am—rather than having a next step, next step, next step. That’s what I did; lo and behold, search consultants came around from time to time for something like a provostship. I felt hugely honored to be considered and wrote an idiosyncratic letter about my interest. I still pinch myself with delight and amazement that I find myself in this kind of role, working on behalf of a university that is part of a worthy field and profession: higher education. I have utmost regard for it—college meant so much to me,
and I have seen so many people similarly lifted up by the golden key that is a liberal arts education. And then to have a hand in shaping not just that field but at my own alma mater: that feels about too good to be true.

Shushok: As you’re aware, I was on the Wake Forest University campus last fall as an American Council on Education Fellow. I was immediately struck by your commitment to teaching an undergraduate course each semester. Of course, I asked if I could attend your “Food Policy and Politics” course each week with approximately 25 undergraduates. It became abundantly apparent to me that you love teaching. I’d love to hear you talk a bit about what you’ve learned about the art of teaching and, conversely, what that experience has taught you.

Students Are the Best Source of Information about Teaching

Kersh: I have learned most from my students. I get a lot of feedback from students I’ve gotten to know, at least a subset, many from my early first decade of teaching. I also try to do focus groups at the end of the semester. We go out and have a meal together—six or seven students—and I ask them to work through the course with me. I want to know what worked and what didn’t, and I make a lot of notes to myself. Feels like I’m in a continuing conversation with them (and myself) over time, especially if I teach a course for years. I really try to get feedback on the structure and foundation.

I teach millennials now, and I learn a lot from them as a group. I’m generalizing, but by and large, millennials have different learning styles, ways of being in a classroom, and ways of connecting to authority. Maybe a few too many academics have a teaching style that they developed at 25, and whether they are 55 or 75, they’re still practicing that. I get a lot of “kids today—they’re just not the same” comments from professors. Well, they’re not the same. I am much more interested in figuring out what they’re like in a classroom setting, in their learning practices—and adapting my teaching practices to meet that. So, for example, in my early teaching career, I typically gave lectures in front of big crowds. My first courses were at Yale and I had 150 students. I would ascend to the high podium, speak for 55 minutes three times a week: that’s what all of us did. (Other classes I would speak for an hour and ten minutes because they were Tuesday and Thursday.) I don’t do that anymore: I avoid lecturing at any great length. I try to break things up, including exercises like world cafes and discussion cases. It’s much more modular, how this generation learns—more focused bursts and frequent group engagement.

They also learn more by being hands-on. Maybe everybody always learned this way, but we are finally realizing it. All this to say that my approach to teaching is based on an attempt to meet the students at least halfway, to best convey basic lessons about politics. Like that work in politics and government is an honorable profession—or at least it can be. That government is not purely exclusively an instrument of destruction and misery but can instead be quite the opposite. It can be a source of uplift and life enhancement, not always by any means, but not “never,” as is often imagined by Americans today. In some ways, government work can be the highest form of fulfillment a human being can find, by making meaningful contributions to what some places still call the commonwealth, to the shared city, region, town, state, and so on in which we reside.

Now I could preach that, but wouldn’t make much difference, so I’d much rather have students get their hands dirty—so to speak. What you’ll observe in my class is a whole array of exercises and structured case studies with role-playing that’s opposed to just saying, “What are the facts of the case?” My students are out in the community working as a team for local clients, in a political or civic space in some way; they have concrete deliverables involving doing the work that I hope they will be inspired to continue with.

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I feel pretty confident that I’m still learning. I’ve torn courses up by the roots and restructured them.
And every spring, with the Provost full-time job laid on top, I’ve taught a new course I’ve never previously taught. I’ll be doing another one this coming semester on “Millennials, Politics and Culture.”

Shushok: To take that a little further, part of what you’re saying is that your pedagogy has to change as students change. How do you think colleges and universities can do a better job responding to generational shifts, especially since we’re in the middle of another generational transition?

**Millennials Are Not Us—and That’s Good**

Kersh: It’s important that question be asked every day if possible. What are we seeking to accomplish with respect to educating this generation—for the societies, the professions, the nonprofit engagements, the passions that they will go on to pursue. Because society has changed, the things that happen in colleges and universities have changed, and the passions and interests that students will pursue have changed. Of course, I’m generalizing, but I think on average it’s true. For anybody over 40 in a university setting who is now teaching or administering to or working with millennials, I would say to them four words: they are not us! I think the dirty little secret of higher education, something we forget all too often, is that when we design curriculum or extra-curricular programs, we are designing those classroom experiences and those outside extra-curricular practices for dimly remembered versions of our 18-year-old selves.

The book I’m writing about millennials is structured so that each chapter is about a significant way in which millennials are distinctive compared to previous generations. Let’s take, for example, the way millennials view authority. There’s a big national survey that’s been around for 60 years that was done of high school seniors. One of the survey questions is open-ended: “Name two or three of your best friends.” A subset of respondents is asked, every three or four years, to take a shorter subset of the survey. One of the questions they ask across time is that “best friends” one. Social network researchers are trying to figure out if you have the same friends in your 30s as you did in your 20s. What about when you moved to a different place? Do those friends linger and remain? A group of researchers had the notion to take those original 18-year-olds and analyze what they said. Over time, there has been a very interesting change. As you come to the millennial generation, the oldest of whom were seniors in high school around 2001-2002, we start to see a trend that only accelerates until by 2008-2009 we reach a significant level of respondents who name their “best friends” as “my mom,” “my parents,” “my aunt who raised me.” Now I don’t know how many of your readers of About Campus are over 40, but I know what they think when hearing that parents are millennial kids’ best friends: Seriously? It’s a thing now. What does that mean if you view your parents as a best friend, or at least peer? It means authority has flattened out pretty dramatically. (Of course, not in every family; family hierarchies still exist, some sadly based on abuse.) Generally, however, you see a flattening of family structures, authority, and decision-making. How then do those kids who have spent maybe a decade being pals with their parents view faculty members?

What does that mean if you view your parents as a best friend, or at least peer? It means authority has flattened out pretty dramatically. (Of course, not in every family; family hierarchies still exist, some sadly based on abuse.) Generally, however, you see a flattening of family structures, authority, and decision-making. How then do those kids who have spent maybe a decade being pals with their parents view faculty members?

I was making a grocery store run when I was in college and I saw my philosophy professor. This man was a legend—he surely didn’t live here on this planet. He lived in some empyrean philosophers’ place and came down to teach us. I was so shocked, I ran out of Kroger leaving behind whatever I was going to buy. I’m generalizing, but there you have it. Now compare this generation, which refers to professors by their first names or a casual greeting like “Yo prof” (which I once received as a text from a new student I hadn’t met before).
Students don’t view authority relationships like they used to, in short. Authority isn’t simply bestowed by virtue of position in the same way that it might have been in previous generations. When I became a young adult, I might have resented authority and wanted to fight that power, just as young people previously resented and shut out their parents as they became teenagers. You don’t see that alienation as much any more. Why would you fight with your best buddy, parent, or caregiver? There’s a lot we can do on campuses to wrestle with this reality; it’s also just one of the many ways this generation is transforming the practice of learning and living on a college campus. We can cross our arms angrily and say, “Kids today,” or we can meet them a good part of the way, learn from their practices, and consider the best ways to prepare them. We really need to think about the ways we might change our approach to achieve positive outcomes.

Shushok: In your role, you’re at the intersection of a constant tension between tradition and innovation. Colleges and universities are always straddling a new generation of students and those over 40 who typically run them. Can you talk about the strategies and challenges of leadership in this scenario, as well as the pitfalls that are important to dodge in the process?

Tradition and Innovation

Kersh: These institutions—colleges, universities—are among the most durable, sustainable institutions that humans have ever created. If you look across history for institutions that have been around for, say, more than four centuries, there aren’t many—and most are universities. We’re an innovative and fast-changing species, and that includes higher education. Yet still our field is radically traditional. At the same time, in a period of enormous upheaval and change across higher education, concerns about costs, access for students, and opportunities represented by online learning, people like Bill Gates are saying that universities were once bricks and mortar and are now “clicks and mortar.” Pretty soon, some argue, we won’t need mortar or buildings at all—we will simply go to college in the cloud.

To simply stand on the traditional ground of many universities as they turn 200, 300, or 400 or in the case of the University of Oxford, 800, is pretty close to malpractice. We have to change along with honoring the traditions. Wake Forest President Nathan Hatch describes our task as being at once both radically traditional and radically innovative. I see my role as, on one hand, sustaining the finest of the traditions that are core to this university’s mission and values—such as face-to-face, relational education. It’s a hallmark here; it’s not going to go away. The residential college is extraordinarily important in an age when students are able to leap bounds with a click of a mouse or press of a smartphone function button. And it’s still the case that a lot of what got us here has to be sustained. How to do this amidst technological changes and fundamental budgetary cost shifts is a thorny task; at the same time, it’s one that a lot of folks at universities like this one take up with joy and a fulfilling spirit.

There are few things more wonderful than being around an amazing, globally diverse, and inventive group of 18- to 21-year-olds that make up our undergraduate institutions, alongside those 20- and 30-somethings who make up our graduate and professional schools student bodies. When I start to feel crunched about how we’re going to sustain what made a place like this distinctively wonderful, while adapting and transforming and moving, when that feels like a circle that cannot be squared, I get out among the students.

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One piece of our success at Wake Forest has been making often risky, strategic big bets that paid off—taking leaps. It’s difficult to incrementally make half-percent-a-year increases in everything you do and get to the kind of place I think many of us need to be. We need to jump sideways or over a wall (or go in a new direction and see around the wall) to be a university we hadn’t been before. We also need to work with faculty. For too long administrators have seen faculty when it comes to university-wide innovation as a kind of species of blocking agent. One Wake leader used to refer to faculty as “those who prefer otherwise.”

A joke that too often gets told about faculty members is that trying to advance a major university innovation with a faculty is pretty much like trying to
relocate a cemetery: You won’t get much help from the people inside. At the same time, I find that these are creative and, dare I say, innovative folks inside their classrooms who are doing amazing things. If they view a university announcement of change with a little skepticism, who can blame them: A typical faculty member may stay somewhere 20, 25, 30 years, while all these administrative big plans and strategies come and go. What I have found much more fruitful than announcing big plans is to really get to know and understand faculty colleagues’ needs, desires, and interests. As a big opportunity rises, don’t figure out how to keep it a secret for a long time—announce it to the faculty. Our roles really should be supporting and making possible the vision of those extraordinary creative faculty in the classrooms, labs, archives, studies, and the field work in the various places they go. That’s what we really should be about, as well as teaching, supporting, and encouraging students. When you get the two of them planning together, wow. There’s just too much at stake to try to make the kinds of moves we need to make unilaterally or with the administration in a bubble somewhere.

Shushok: I want to conclude our time by asking what’s capturing your thinking these days?

The Changing Nature of Community

Kersh: That’s a wonderful question. I wrote my dissertation (which became my first book) on the idea of union in a political or civic sense. What does it mean for people to be living in unity or community with one another? I think the nature of communal belonging has changed dramatically across American society, and campuses are not immune. We are currently deeply polarized in the United States, and it’s not just because of the current occupant of the Oval Office. It goes back a couple of decades now—to a deliberate oppositional strategy. The national legislature is divided in ways that are disconcerting, way beyond healthy or even unhealthy disagreements on policy matters between Republicans and Democrats. For the first time anyone has ever measured, we have a significant number of both Republicans and Democrats who, when polled, say they fear someone who identifies with a different party. They’re afraid of them, at least at some level. So, we’re a very polarized country, a very polarized American society. Let me frame it this way. A society into which our students are graduating is deeply polarized in a way that we haven’t seen for a long time. It’s also much more diverse. You look at a typical American TV show or classroom or workplace and it likely features a lot more ethnic, racial, international, gender, and sexual orientation diversity than we’ve seen in our American past.

In some ways parts of our society are re-segregating. But on average, you find a more diverse space is particularly the case in the urban centers to which many of our graduating students flock when they finish undergraduate or graduate school.

It’s a more global society they’re entering, that shows up in mundane kinds of ways like the little North Carolina town I grew up in, which had maybe two restaurants, both of them served southern food of course, because what other kind was there. One was the Pisgah Fish Camp, which had fried catfish and hush puppies. Now you can go to this little mountain town and there’s Thai, and Pan Asian, and various European cuisines, not just the American version of Italian food. All over the globe, the winds of change that shape what Thomas Friedman describes as our “ever flatter” world and burgeoning global trends and practice. And maybe most important for these young people—what on earth does it mean to live virtually the way they do. So much of life is spent communicating through devices or in some cases inventing avatars, new personas of themselves, either in “shoot ’em up” video games or enormous online communities like “Farmville” or “Second City.” Take those dimensions alone: What is very much on my mind these days and speaks to your question is “what does it mean to live in community?” when our society and our campuses are so much more polarized and global and diverse and virtual.

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In fact, we’re engaged in a year-long exploration of what we’re calling “Rethinking Community.” Not because it has to be rethought in some theoretical sense, but because it’s changing before our eyes. If we can get some of it right, if we can understand that these remarkable young people we call Millennials have a deep yearning (often unsatisfied) for the kind of meaningful, often face-to-face deep-level interactions that used to come more naturally. We must figure out how
to harness these technologies to enhance connections, as opposed to further driving us apart or distancing us from one another. We need to figure out how to get folks from different, even polarized positions, to talk to each other. Rather than screaming past each other or tweeting insults about anybody who’s got a different view or has criticized us, I’d love for us to explore the possibilities and suggest how other communities could be made stronger in these kinds of ways. I’m thinking a lot about what it means to live in community on a college campus and in turn how these students will live better lives beyond college campuses. We know there are vastly increased levels of loneliness, depression, anxiety, a sense of isolation; the irony is so profound. There’s a lot to work on there, but it’s manifestly and even urgently the task of folks in positions like ours, at universities like ours, to devote some serious time to thinking about the millennials and what can motivate them to become their “best selves.” It’s not our story repeated, it’s theirs. I’ll say once again: “They are not us!”