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Leading by Example

Kathleen Murray '79 stays true to liberal arts roots in new role as Whitman College president.

By Sarah (Zeller) Julian '07



As a first-generation student, Kathleen Murray was “flying blind” when she first arrived at Illinois Wesleyan, “but it turned out to be the perfect choice for me.”

Kathleen has spent her career at liberal arts institutions. At Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis., she served as associate professor of music, piano department chair, dean of the conservatory of music and dean of faculty. At Birmingham-Southern College in Alabama, she was provost and vice president for academic affairs, as well as professor of music.

She joined Macalester as provost and dean of faculty in 2008 and served as the college’s acting president in 2013. As acting president, she guided Macalester’s strategic planning process, directed the staff and made significant advancements in stewardship efforts.

Kathleen Murray '79 was recently named the 14th president of Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash. She previously served as provost and dean of the faculty at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn.

“With her rich history at institutions like Whitman, Kathy brings us a new perspective, but a perspective that has the experience we need to lead us forward at this particular stage of the College’s evolution,” said Board of Trustees Chairman Brad McMurchie. A liberal arts and sciences undergraduate institution, Whitman College has an enrollment of around 1,500 students.

Her experiences at IWU helped transform her future, she told Whitman’s student newspaper, *The Pioneer*. “[Before I went to college], I didn’t know what a liberal arts college was so I can’t say that I was intentional in my choice,” she told the newspaper.

“My parents never went to college so they were very supportive, but we were flying blind. I walked onto the campus at Illinois Wesleyan University in central Illinois, and I just thought, ‘I can maybe fly by.’ I had low confidence, but I thought maybe I could survive, I could manage. It turned out to be the perfect choice for me.”

A career in higher education leadership wasn't her original goal, she told *The Pioneer*. "I don't think any of us starting off our academic career imagine becoming provosts or deans or presidents. So in my case, it happened quite by chance," she said, with the president of Lawrence offering her an interim dean of the conservatory position on short notice.

"It was kind of the middle of my career so I thought it would be fun to do for a year," she said. "It's only a year! Well, that search failed so they ultimately asked me to stay in the position and end their search." The role led her to think about broader issues at the institution, sparking her new path.

She looks forward to the opportunities and challenges awaiting her in her role as Whitman's president.

"Whitman offers this fabulous opportunity to join a community that's already well-established and has a wonderful history and a pretty amazing presence," said Kathleen. "It has an exceptional faculty, students who are engaged and curious and who persist to graduation at a very high rate, a very skilled staff, a dynamic and passionate board of trustees and a budget that has been very well managed. That's a fabulous place to start. But there is also work to be done."

She plans to be a hands-on president, she added. "I think being a presence on campus is important. [That means] going to sporting events, concerts, guest lecturers, etc. I think there are all kinds of ways, but I think the students should guide it in terms of what would be meaningful to them with my presence."

In addition to her IWU bachelor's degree in music, Kathleen holds a master's degree in piano performance from Bowling Green State University and a doctorate of music in piano performance and pedagogy from Northwestern University.

She has authored more than a dozen articles on music and music education, has recorded on the CRI record label, was an accompanist at the Prague Spring International Music Festival and has performed on Wisconsin Public Radio and in numerous solo piano recitals across the Midwest.

Kathleen says she plans to move to Walla Walla with her partner Bridget Reischl in early summer and will begin her presidency on July 1, 2015.