

Oral History Interview with John Young
Conducted by Kathleen Lingley, 2003
Transcription by Danielle Dungey, November, 2004.

KL- I'll get you to state your name then.

JY- Okay, my name is John Young. I came to Saint Mary's in January 1970.

KL- How is it that you came to come to Saint Mary's?

JY- It's kind of a long story. I was a research engineer working for Exxon in the States, and I came up to Halifax on a loan assignment to the Imperial refinery in Dartmouth. And I liked Halifax so much that I quit my job, decided I wanted to stay in Halifax. And I looked around, and what could a PhD in chemical engineering do in Halifax at that. So I just gravitated to university, and met up with the Dean at that time, and became a faculty member eventually.

KL- In your department, you are a professor in the Department of Chemistry?

JY- Correct.

KL- Okay. How has your curriculum changed over the time - either what you taught or the courses that you offered?

JY- It's a good question because change occurs slowly. From my own personal perspective, I think I've come to emphasise particularly the lab more. Or more generally, trying to involve my students in a more active role during teaching - a little less of me as a talking head sitting up front and of them sitting there passively taking notes. A lecture as being described as an exercise by which the professor's notes become the students' notes without passing through the mind of either. And I think that sort of thing bothered me, and I've been generally interested in studying teaching, studying pedagogy, studying how people learn and trying to put some of that into practice-rather limited by the very reactionary structure of a university. But nonetheless it's one of the things that I've certainly tried to do. I mean, I've sort of have always been very interested in my teaching as such.

KL- How has the Chemistry Department expanded since you came here in 1970?

JY- Expanded?

KL- Has it grown larger or...

JY- Not substantially. It's certainly grown in capability and equipment and so on. But not greatly in numbers: maybe about two or three people something like that I guess.

- KL- Just looking through some of the questions that I have...How did the student population change since you first came to Saint Mary's? Did you notice any changes in the students?
- JY- Yes, I suppose some things do occur to me: some of which are funny, and some of which are nice, and some are not so nice I suppose. But if I could think of one thing...students are in a sense more aggressive than they used to be - less passively accepting. And I'm not saying this is a bad thing by any means. I think it's a plot driven by the fact the students are very conscious that they're paying for this more and more expensive experience, and they seem less tolerant of bad performance, which I kind of like. But it does seem to be a central thing. Students are working more, I mean working outside (again, part cause [of] the money question), and this clearly poses a lot of pressure for them, and I think that's part of it. We also have greater number of foreign students, particularly, I think, students from the Far East, who are under even greater pressure perhaps from parental expectations and so on from the folks at home. So I think those factors very much weigh...well, I mean I talk to students a lot. One of the things, sort of, most fundamental principles of I suppose teaching is to find out what the students know, and to build on it, so that you've got linked structures of learning if you will. And the only way that you can really do that is by talking to students. It's a radical idea. I mean you don't learn it by your test results, I don't think very much. And so up in the lab, you have multiple hours of actually talking to students when they're trying to do something else. So those things factor in. I think it's the most [effective] way to get to know, at least somewhat, what students' are doing. Have a beer with them occasionally. It sort of helps, particularly if you give them several.
- KL- Also, what do think students wish to gain from their educational experiences at Saint Mary's? And do you think that's changed?
- JY- I know a very sad answer to that in a way. And this is a generalisation, but it's clear that a lot of students are only concerned about being certified rather than education or at least education is secondary. And what I mean by that is that the educational process is a means to an end, not an end in itself. So it's a matter of getting the grades cause I want to get into something else, I want to be a nurse or a teacher or something, and I'm going to take a course of action, which gives me, to some extent, the easiest path to arrive at that end. Which is understandable in a way. The real sort of thing that's somewhat sad, particularly as in all likelihood a large number of the students will not end up in the area in which they think they're going to go into when they're in school. So they may be doubly misguided in not taking advantage of the opportunities available in school and going into and preparing themselves for an area which may not be their first interest. But then they find that they don't go into that area. So, we sort of encourage students to take very broadly based courses, if you will, and to delay making a decision, a path decision, as long as you can. And I'm the one who didn't. I mean, I'm the

one who actually chose early what I wanted to do, and it turned out to be the right thing for me. But that's, I think, is more the exception than the rule.

KL- Also, how have research facilities and opportunities changed at Saint Mary's over time?

JY- Enormously. And in some senses really dramatically within the past three or four years-it's sort of like an exponential growth thing. I remember in the seventies...well, go back to what terrible computer facilities we had. We had a...the mainframe machine with those punch cards more or less had probably less capability than the laptop on my desk. And obviously that has been a very important tool in research both in data collection handling but also in information access to information on the web and so on...publications too. So those are ways looking internal and external ways in which the environment for research has changed. We also have more graduate programmes than we used to have. We have a Faculty of Graduate Studies now, for example. We have a first PhD programmes coming in. All of which are substantially research based if you will and make research demands. We have the Tier 1 Chairs coming in. We have the relatively later success of a faculty in attracting research funds. Not entirely cause their better, but, but maybe they are, but there are more opportunities: there's more, the government is more willing to support research, which is a big factor and University's administrations appear more willing to support research. And so, more research there will be.

KL- What do you think the Chemistry or even the general Science programme has in particular to offer students?

JY- It's a good question because in a sense, it's almost the comparative [fact] to pass with other institutions. Why do I go to Saint Mary's? Why don't I go to Acadia or StFX or whatever? And it's probably different for different departments. In other words, from advising somebody which institutions that they might want to go to, I won't advise on an institution: I'd say, "well, what do you want to take?" For example, Saint Mary's had very strong Astronomy/Physics access if you will, and people want to go into that area. And then Saint Mary's probably has advantages over many, many other schools, if you will. Can you still, as an institution, offer relatively intimate contact between students and faculty (which is generally good)? People talk about small classes, well they're not so small as they used to be and they're in danger of getting considerably larger, if you will. One reason of coming to Saint Mary's, is it's in Halifax and Halifax is a nice place to be. It's an externality but...I mean, the degree you get from Saint Mary's in science (or not) as a credential will not be any different from that you get from other schools, if you will. And in the Chemistry Department, we have total success in getting our honours students, while not a great number, into Graduate School. And I don't think we've ever, ever had a student apply to medical school who's not got in. [They're] a small number, this is an elite. And it centres around the opportunities that we give our honours and many of our major students to do undergraduate research with faculty. And that's a major element of research: is the involvement

of undergraduate students in publishable research, with full assistance of faculty members, fulfilling roles which are often filled by graduate students elsewhere.

KL- Well, I just have one more question, I was wondering if you had fond memories of faculty or staff you've worked with over the years? If there's any that you particularly wanted to share.

JY- You mean you [words muffled due to laughter] want me to mention names of the guilty?

KL- Well...if anything [comes to mind] or not...

JY- I mean, just a generality, our department has always been a very collegial one: very internally supported [mumbles something inaudible]. I'm hard-put to think of anybody I found obnoxious. Well, I don't think so. We have a small department, we feel somewhat oppressed, at least certainly we have. Students are not exactly flocking to chemistry. In part because of, I think, bad high school experiences. But we've always felt the need as a department to be quite political: to be very much involved in the administrating abilities, and that sort of thing, in order to make our presence known, if you will, and to fight hard for resources and so on. Which in the past, we've probably been able to attract disproportionately to our size: I think it would be fair to say that chemistry is a fairly, is a relatively expensive and resource-rich field, if you will. It's expensive to do chemistry, if you will. Yeah, you know, my colleagues have been fine-do you hear that?

KL- I wasn't looking for anything bad about anyone.

JY- Next time you ask me that, I'll tell you.

KL- I've asked all my questions, did you have anything you wanted to add that I didn't ask you about?

JY- No, I really wasn't clear what you wanted. What are you looking for? Sort of historical things about the university or something...[?] clearly or not...at least not directly. You know like factual things: remembered about a certain time, you know, sort of diary-type stuff, which I'm not very good at that actually. So you say you didn't?

KL- I was looking for more of a flavour of the university.

JY- A sense of it?

KL- Yeah, from the faculty and from former students I've spoken to.

JY- Yeah, I remember an [activity] that we have as an IUPAC/CSC conference coming up, which is the third big chemistry conference at the Western Hotel in Ottawa. And they'll be about 2500 attendees and so on. But Saint Mary's students are planning their own section. We've got 35 chemistry, ex-chemistry

students, most of whom are now professors at other universities, and we're all getting together: a bunch of them are my students.

KL- Oh, that's nice.

JY- [Geez] actually one of the Profs. Here is own of my ex-students: Serjob[?] Singer. He took, he came from me way back when-before I retired.

KL- One thing I just remembered about, I remember reading in yearbooks about Science Saturdays or Science Days when they'd have high school students come in. Can you tell me anything about that? Or were you ever involved?

JY- Yeah, quite a bit. They weren't overly successful, as I recall. They were more useful and fun for our students who took part in them and were happy to prepare demonstrations of their own work and so on. But it was quite difficult to get students to come in on a Saturday. I mean, they're excited, if you will. And that was obviously the intention. Of course now we have the whatever that Fall fair is that we have here. You know we sort of do roughly the same things we used to on Saturday when they, when the university brings students and parents in to find out about the university. We always put on displays down there in the most useless [Muffled by laughter] theatre auditorium, whatever that...the big room.

KL- Oh, in Loyola?

JY- Yeah.

KL- Yeah, I think it's called a conference room.

JY- Conference, yeah, that's right. It is...

KL-All these different names.

JY- Yeah, I know, it's confusing. And so, at the same time, we always put on stuff here as well. But it's not on the scale it used to be. I mean, I remember one Science Saturday when the Biology Department converted the whole of the downstairs corridor into the inside of a fish...and these, you know, these great big organs hanging down. So the whole corridor was the guts of a fish, and you sort of walked through it. And then when had a, we made a river one time with...did testing in it and so on. No, it never really came back to that sort of scale of activity. And it was not worthwhile. The point is, if they don't come, and by and large they didn't, you need to sort of get...you know you spend hours and hours and hours working this think and maybe thirty people come. You know, we said, heck with it, [it's not]... So, that's what I remember about Science Saturdays. They were valuable from the point of view of the students who participated in the learning experience.

KL- Okay, great. I guess I can turn this off then.

Tape stops-end of interview.