

**Barrett Oral History Project**  
**Interview with Karen Bruhn**  
22 February 2019, Barrett Campus  
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Notetaker: Caroline Livingston

DZENGA: Good afternoon, this is Primrose Dzenga and Caroline Livingston interviewing Dr Karen Bruhn at Barrett ,the Honors college on 22 February 2019 for the programme Barret at thirty. Good Afternoon Dr Bruhn.

BRUHN: Good Afternoon.

DZENGA: Thank you for having us.

BRUHN: My pleasure.

DZENGA: DR Bruhn can you tell us about your training and other places you taught before coming to Barrett?

BRUHN: Well...I got my PHD and my MA at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in Religious Studies, with emphasis on History as Christian traditions.

I got my BA at Hunter college, in New York City. I was a non-traditional student... I had gone to college in the Midwest after high school, as a theater major but I dropped out... and I got a job in theater and then I was just in the Midwest and New York, acting and then I decided that was no way to grow old and so I went back to school when I was 34.

DZENGA: Wow so you were a non-traditional student. That very interesting. And so, after that I was wondering when and why you chose to join Barrett.

BRUHN: I was finishing up my PHD and my thesis advisor, saw a Job for Barrett posted. And he said you ought to apply for this, and as it turned out I had a childhood friend who had married and settled in Tempe.

And I thought, Oh if I get an interview, I will get a free trip to see my friend, [*laughter*] so I did, and I did.

DZENGA: [laughter] That is very good. Can you also tell us a little bit about your current position? How you came to it? How long you have been in it? And its place in your Barrett experience?

BRUHN: Ok. I currently am the interim faculty chair. But that's only for this year because the duly elected chair had to step down. I have been the chair before, and so that's why I was chosen to fill in, this year. I was the original Barrett Dean's fellow, and when I stepped down from being the chair in 2013, and Peggy Nelson was still the vice Dean. As Barrett grew, her job was growing, and she saw an opportunity to kind of handoff some of her duties to me. So, I took on some of her duties, but remained teaching, so I was half-time teaching, half time kind of administration, and they didn't know what to call me and we finally landed on Dean's fellow.

DZENGA: Oh, that's very good. If I may ask what year, this was? When did you join Barrett-

BRUHN: I joined Barrett in 1998, I became a dean's fellow, in 2013.

DZENGA: 2013. So, you published an in-depth article on the origins and development and serving , as you called it...The Human Event seminar, to students at Barrett, in the anthology Pursuit of Excellency in a Networked Society.

How does teaching the Human even influence the pursuit of excellence at Barrett?

BRUHN: OH, well... I'm going to answer that in two parts, let me tell you how its influenced me [laughter] and my pursuit of excellence. I feel like it's been this incredible gift to be able to remain a student in my professional career. You know, to earn a living and to be able to continue to learn and grow, and help others learn and grow ... So I think that the way that the Human Event contributes to excellence is that it is an opportunity for students, it's a space for students, to just use their minds, you know, and to just think and reason and discuss and be wrong and get your mind changed [laughter] and that's, I think, that's an incredible privilege to have, and I think an even greater privilege to be able to oversee it, you know, to be the facilitator.

LIVINGSTON: And if you don't mind, how do you believe that your experience as a non-traditional student has changed how you teach people in the classroom?

BRUHN: I think ...I'm probably pretty immature so I don't know how, how you know when I came here, I don't know that I was that different than my colleagues, but certainly as I've gotten older. And, you know I'm older, I think there's only one faculty member who is older than me. It's just given me some perspective on students. I have a son who just turned 17, so I have a whole new understanding of who the students are and what they are going through.

DZENGA: Oh, that's amazing. So, you say that teaching the Human Event has allowed you to keep on being a student, and I think the second part to my question, on pursuit of excellence was also for faculty so, not just you but your fellow faculty. So how do you think that the Human Event has influenced their pursuit of excellence ?

BRUHN: Well I mean in the academy, in professional academia, being a generalist, knowing something about a lot of things, is not that highly valued.

Academics are encouraged to be narrow and deep. So, we are a bit of an anomaly here, at Barrett, and it takes a certain kind of person to want to do that. But, I mean, my office is next door to an evolutionary biologist [*laughter*] and so I have those conversations, that if I were in a religious studies department I would not have. Now I think the academy is kind of catching up to us, and more of these sorts of transdisciplinary projects are being encouraged, but we've been doing it for a long time.

DZENGA: Oh, wow. You mention in this essay that the mandate to grow enrollment by 2013, to 6000 students, [which] posed possible challenges to the effective delivery of the Human Event, can you expand on that? Like, how...what kind of challenges did you foresee?

BRUHN: We've always wanted to have unity and comparability without having uniformity because the evolutionary biologist has different strengths and he should draw from his strengths when he teaches in the same way that I have strengths and we all have strengths. So, the challenge has been how can we offer comparable experiences that are not identical.

DZENGA: And so increasing the students to 6000 would, how would that make it identical-

BRUHN: Well, when I first came here, I think I was the sixth or seventh faculty hired, we achieved that unity without uniformity you know, by talking in the hallways. We didn't have policies or procedures, we just kind of figured it out. But as we grew that became no longer possible. And so we had to figure out ways to standardize it, and give some institutional history, things like that.

LINGSTON: What do you -- how do you think Barrett has done in growing across all four of the campuses? Do you think they have done a good job of maintaining that central idea of Barrett?

BRUHN: I hope so. You know it's very difficult for everyone, mostly because of distance. I don't think, for example, I think we do a better job of being connected to Downtown Campus here at Tempe than we do with the other campuses, not because we think differently of them, but they are just so far away. I mean to go to West is...even if you are driving it's at least an hour each way. You know, it's an afternoon if you want to go see somebody teach a class or to just have coffee with one of your colleagues... and that's hard and so I think technology will be our friend. At Barrett we are still figuring it out, the way, I think everybody else is. So, I think we have done a good job, I think we could do a better job, I think, we are trying to a better job.

DZENGA. That's great. So, five years later, has that goal been met... the enrollment goal?

BRUHN: No. No, it hasn't been met. You mean around about the four campuses?

DZENGA: So...the 6000 students. Your mandate to enroll and increase the students to 6000 has that goal been met?

BRUHN: Oh yes, that's been met! [*laughter*]. That was easy.

DZENGA: That is good to know. And how has Barrett faculty adjusted in order to accommodate the growing student body?

BRUHN: Well we've grown. I mean, I think it was 2013, 2014, we hired 14 faculty, and...

LIVINGSTON: Oh, wow.

BRUHN: And I was on that search committee, I mean that's just incredible, We had to... of course , look at all the applications, make those kinds of choices. Interview them, have them have campus visits, then we had 14 new faculty, how do you mentor... 14 faculty?

Usually when you hire you get maybe three, mostly one or two, and I think that's a very different mentoring experience than mentoring 14. How do we convey that idea of comparability without uniformity? Those were ... it was challenging.

DZENGA: So, you were talking about mentoring the faculty who were hired. Can you share with us a little bit about how that program goes, of mentoring faculty?

BRUHN: Well it is rather, what the program looks like when there are 14 mentees, it looks different than when there are three mentees. But the principles, the underlying principles, remain the same.

We want to support these young scholars, as they become generalists, as they expand; a lot of them are newly minted PhDs and they are used to just writing about a very narrow topic. You know very deeply. So through workshops, through meetings with their mentors , meetings with, faculty chair, we give them resources, and are there to answer questions about what it means to expand -- for example, I teach in my 272, I teach Sigmund Freud, right because he is a foundational thinker. Now, in my PhD program I read what he had to say about religion, but that's all I knew about Freud, and so when I first started teaching that's what I put on my syllabus. But as I expanded and grew, I realized that really there were better things to put on my syllabus given my goals and I got there from asking the other faculty what they taught from Freud and why and having these conversations. So, we just want to provide a structure for new faculty. Their mentor would probably go over student evaluations with them, and student evaluations are usually fine, but we want to make sure that the new faculty is contextualizing them.

DZENGA: That's true.

BRUHN: Appropriately, because, you know, you can get 49 great evaluations and one not so great, and of course you have a tendency to focus on that one not so great! And you know so, just older, more experienced voices to help this person professionalize. To go from being a student to being a professional.

DZENGA: So, a few years ago. You won a faculty achievement award, for teaching The Human Event at Barrett. Can you share that experience with us?

BRUHN: Well I have one of my colleagues, Jackie Scott-Lynch to thank, she nominated me and did all the heavy lifting of writing a really supportive letter...

But it was a really great experience, we got to go to a really, posh, resort, for the dinner. And I wasn't the only person honored, you know there is a best teacher, best researcher, best service, and then they give two alumni awards...And one of the alumni and of course I can't remember his name, but he was a former NFL player, had been successful and now he and his wife run a non-profit school, for special needs kids. It was just so inspiring. You know I was like: I am on the same stage with this guy. I mean he was, and of course I can't really remember his name, that's what I really remember about it was, you know, just being surrounded by excellence.

DZENGA: Well congratulations.

BRUHN: Thank you.

DZENGA: So, you worked with Dr Nelson and she talked about how you worked with her to develop the Honor Faculty Advisors program. What was that like? What did you have to put in place?

BRUHN: Well you know, when you have an institution, within an institution, you have to find ways to situate yourself correctly. And we couldn't do what we do, if we didn't have allies in the units. You know, I'm not a biochemist but many of my students are going to want to write their theses in biochemistry, so I and all my colleagues have to have some sort of path to that. And so, the faculty honors advisors are...professors within the units who value working with undergraduates. And really all we, and that's the most important thing, and they already have that, but we have provided a structure, and support...no, not that we give them much money at all but...just. I wrote -- I'm actually very proud of this -- last summer I put together this, which is a handbook for the Faculty Honors Advisors. And it has things like, this is how students get their credit, and this is what happens when a student wants to do a project not in your unit. And this is how you contact other people, and these are the *t*'s that need to be crossed and the *i*'s that need to be dotted. So, it's providing support, for faculty in the unit that work with honors student.

DZENGA: So, the book is called *The Faculty Honors Advisor's Handbook*, and this is available to all faculty honors advisors in all other departments?

BRUHN: Yes.

DZENGA: And when did you write this?

BRUHN: I mean, when I say I wrote it, I did write a lot of the documents in here but mostly last summer was a matter of pulling them together because we would email them, 'oh, here is a checklist for creating a good Honors Contract, and here is a way to access the Honors Fund' and I wanted to get it all in one place. So, I put it together last summer, the summer of 2018.

DZENGA: So, do you think that putting together this book is in any way similar to the way that you were working with Dr Nelson before you had a book and working out what to do?

BRUHN: Yes, absolutely, because some of the documents she wrote and we talked about everything that went in here. We talked about everything that went out to the faculty honors advisers; we wanted to make sure that we were consistently on message, but there is such a thing as too much information. So, we had to decide what they needed to know and what they didn't need to know because we could take care of it for them, things like that.

LIVINGSTON: What do you think makes a faculty member a good honors advisor?

BRUHN: Obviously they have to have some sort of enthusiasm for working with students, not just their own research. But they also have to have an in-depth understanding of their own department, because as we all know, writing a thesis in biochemistry is not the same as writing a thesis in art history.

So, the art history advisor needs to understand who her colleagues are and what they are doing, so that she can match the student up with an appropriate thesis director, or help that student choose classes that are going to take them where they want to go in terms of the thesis.

DZENGA: So, just as a follow up, how, has the Faculty Honors Advisors program

evolved?

BRUHN: I mean when Dean Nelson started, I think there were maybe twenty or thirty and now there are over a hundred. So, we try and get somebody from each unit. And then one of the things that these faculty honors advisors have to do is, compose a document about what the requirements are in their unit for a thesis, and then we post those in a central place.

So, it's harder to get hundred-faculty-plus to do that than it was to get 20 faculty to do that. And again, you know unity without uniformity [*laughter*]. You know what I mean, that's always the battle cry.

DZENGA: Absolutely. And so, given the current status how do you envision it going into the future, the program.

BRUHN: I think that we -- heretofore, it's been about the FHA connecting with their students. You know providing support for that. I think that we are going to have to start asking them to be more connected to their fellow faculty members, like advocate for Barrett in their faculty meetings. Be a source of knowledge when one of their colleagues comes in and says, 'So, what do I have to do, If I'm going to have an honors contract or what's the bureaucracy of teaching an honors section?' I think that the Faculty Honors Advisors are going to have to be more involved in that end.

DZENGA: Why?

BRUHN: Because it's getting too big for one or two people to do it. In the past who ever it was would say, 'I don't really know how to do an honors contract,' and the FHA would say, 'Oh, well, email Karen Bruhn, she will help you.' And of course, I will but it gets to the point where one person isn't enough. And so, we have to disseminate the knowledge a little.

DZENGA: So, Barrett is the only residency honors college in the nation, as well as the biggest honors college in the country overall. How do you think it fares with Ivy League colleges?

BRUHN: Well, I never went to an Ivy League college. So, I don't really know, I know it's a lot cheaper... Actually my husband went to Ivy League colleges for his

undergraduate and graduate degree and he is always talking about how this experience is really comparable and, in some ways, even surpasses that. Because he went to Yale as an undergrad and Yale has a definition. When you walk in the door there are certain parameters that are there, not bad ones, but they are there. And Barrett's parameters are more fluid, you know.

DZENGA: I ask this question because [ASU] President Crow said Barrett was modeled against the Ivy League model and is supposed to deliver more. And my question to you is, having been here -- since 1998? That's a very long time; do you see that having filtered into the system?

BRUHN: Well, when we got our own campus, that was on the path of becoming like an Ivy League, I think the low student teacher ratio, is comparable to the Ivy, the advising system, the student affairs programming, I mean those are all comparable to being an Ivy. Students are comparable to Ivy League, in terms of scores and what they do after graduation. Where I think we offer more is just about that expansiveness and fluidity I was talking about. We are able to meet the student where they are, in terms of helping them be, I was going to say achieve their goals, and you know we all want to achieve our goals, but I think there is a spirit of Barrett that goes beyond that. It's about being the best you can be. Of course, we want you to get your dream job, of course we want that for you, but you probably are going to get that. How can we help you be the best person that you can be? I think that plays more of a role in Barrett's vision for its students than it does in the Ivies. I haven't been to an Ivy, so I don't know for certain.

DZENGA: Neither have I, but I'm having a good experience here [*laughter*].

BRUHN: I'm glad.

DZENGA: So, my question in follow up to that would be, are there areas that you feel Barrett could improve? And what would they be?

BRUHN: I think that Barrett could have a stronger message that would calm students down. I have seen students in the last 20 years get more and more anxious about the world, and maybe they are right, maybe they are right to be more anxious about the world [*laughter*]. But I think we could do a better job of saying it's going to be ok, it's not going to be easy but it's going to be ok. Relax. Remember I teach mostly freshmen and

they are just terrified when they get here, and they are more terrified than they used to be. I guess the world is a scarier place.

DZENGA: How do you suggest that it is...

BRUHN: You know when I came here there was no such thing as Facebook, there was no such thing as social media, we barely had email. So, the world was smaller. I think that's a big one, social media, and how social media constructs an ideal identity. Or how we try and construct our own ideal identities, and the pressure that it puts us under.

DZENGA: So, Barrett could incorporate that into the teaching? How would Barrett help students, to calm them down in view of this?

BRUHN: To help them understand that their public profile is a persona, not who they are. Let's -- instead of concentrating on building that persona, or participating in that, let's spend more time figuring out who you really are?

LIVINGSTON: Looking more inwards than outwards?

BRUHN: Yeah, inward and less emphasis on how it looks. I think students are very anxious about how they present themselves. With good reason! I think the world puts a lot of emphasis on that. But if we can get students to understand who they are and understand the value of who they are, then I think they are a lot less anxious about presenting themselves.

DZENGA: Barrett is a leader in delivering a multi-disciplinary curricular to thousands of students, which I think makes it an authority in the setup and delivery of top class education, at a reasonable price. How can Barrett use this authority to become a leader in the provision of a rounded educational experience?

BRUHN: Well I think we are looking at a great opportunity for that, as our reputation grows, and I think our message has to be more than simply, 'we have great dorms, and great student programs.' Our message has to be, 'we have a particular commitment to a multi-disciplinary education,' and I think that the way we approach education is important on two levels. Number one, I think it makes you a better person. And number two, there is a transactional sort of practical aspect to being able to look at a problem from multiple perspectives.

Being able to listen to people who maybe don't come from the same place as you, either culturally or professionally. Being able to engage in that conversation, having enough confidence in yourself to know that you are not your proposal [*laughter*]. You know often people want to criticize your proposal, that's ok, let's all be here together and learn. I mean I think we have...that kind of education makes for better citizens.

And I think we are a public institution; you know we should be producing good citizens.

DZENGA: Oh, that is good. So, Barrett at 30: you have been here 20 of those 30 years.

BRUHN: That's right.

DZENGA: Where do you see Barrett in the future?

BRUHN: That's a good question. Well not with me [*laughter*] because I'm going to retire. But in ten years I think that they will have a different relationship to technology, and I hope that they are able to harness technology and use it to provide students a better experience, not just an easier one. I think that they will have, or they should have, stronger connections to the disciplinary units than they have now, and they are strong. But I think that, that connection needs to be even stronger, I think that they will have more of a national profile than they do now even.

DZENGA: So, you have mentioned technology twice, first in regard to students and anxiety to the world, and now about Barrett providing a better experience, in regard to technology. How has technology evolved at Barrett since you have been here?

BRUHN: When I came here in '98... I got my first computer, in '92, you know when I came here, I had my own laptop. It cost twenty- five hundred dollars!

DZENGA: That's a lot of money.

BRUHN: You know, nobody had a computer. The students might go to the computer lab, when I taught on study abroad, I would say, 'leave your computer at home.' You are not able to use it and they are just going to steal it. Now I can't imagine a student going anywhere without, some electronic device to connect with, that helps with their education.

So, what I'm really thinking about is online education. I really think about that a lot, because, online education, this is one thing I hope we improve on, reaches people that would otherwise not have access to this kind of education and I think we have a moral obligation to try and reach those people and technology will help us do that. On the other hand, technology can be a cash cow for educational institutions, round em up, you know, get them on line, 'Get-that-degree-thank-you-for-your-money,' and so we have to negotiate that.

DZENGA: Absolutely, absolutely. Also, you talked about your teaching study abroad courses, and I think that's very much in line with Barrett trying to be part of the Global Village. So, what courses have you taught and how have they affected your experience of being at Barrett?

BRUHN: Well I have taught a few times in the London, Dublin and Edinburgh program, because my own research is on England. And I have also taught in the Greece and Italy program because I am fairly well informed about the ancient world and that's one place you can study the ancient world.

One thing that I have noticed, because lots of colleges go to London, and Rome and Florence in the summer and Athens, it only makes me appreciate our students even more. Not only are they smart and polite but they are just intellectually curious in a way that I don't see other students always being. I can't tell you how many times there has been some sort of class activity, some sort of tour and the tour guide, starts on his or her spiel and the students will go, oh yeah we know that, this is bla bla bla [*laughter*] and the tour guide is like well ok, I guess I don't need to talk. They are just... A colleague of mine once said you can only be 19 and in Paris once, who are the other people that spend a lot of time abroad? Retirees. And the retirees' experience is, oh this is a lot like Pittsburgh, you know they are comparing it to their own experience. Whereas the young person is experiencing it on its own terms. That's fun to be a part of.

DZENGA: I also noticed that you are very widely published,

BRUHN: Well I wouldn't say that [*laughter*].

DZENGA: Well you are published quite a bit, can we, could we say that?

BRUHN: Ok. [*laughter*]

DZENGA: So, you are published quite a bit and some of it if not most of it has been once you were already at Barrett, so has been being at Barrett and nurturing your own writing as a scholar, how has that affected you?

BRUHN: Well, teaching students how to write has certainly made me a better writer. Not a faster writer though, I just had to carve out the time, you know it's mostly that. It's mostly finding the time. Dean Nelson was very good about figuring out a system of teaching load that could support faculty who wanted to publish but the publishing always had to have some connection to our teaching, which it did.

DZENGA: Well Dr Bruhn I think these are all the questions that we had for you today, but should you think of anything else, that you would like us to know or any questions that you have you can contact Vice Dean Foote, or Dr Boyce-Jacino or Mathew Jenstedt and we will arrange another time to sit down again or go over those questions. Thank you so much for your time.

BRUHN: Oh, my pleasure. Good luck with this project it's an important one.

DZENGA: Thank you... Please, when I'm talking to you, I realize you genuinely care about Barrett, I mean this could have been any other college, why do you care?

BRUHN: Because I think it offers something really valuable. You know, I am a little smug, sometimes, you know, I look at the world today and I think oh my god I should be doing more, I should be out there on the frontlines, or I should live in a tiny apartment, so that I can give all my money to these really worthy causes,

And then I find myself not willing to do that, but I always tell myself [*whispers*] but you know what? You are teaching bright kids how to be in the world [*laughter*]. That's worth something right? You never know, I might be teaching the next president of the United States. Or somebody who is going to go be a diplomat, or somebody who is going to figure out a new way to feed people who don't have enough to eat, so I'm lucky that way.

DZENGA: Oh, wow, so you have that much confidence in your students?

BRUHN: Most of them [*laughter*]. Most days [*laughter*].

DZENGA: Dr Bruhn, once again thank you so much.

BRUHN: Sure.

DZENGA: Thank you for sitting down with us.