



2015

Heffernan, James Oral History Interview

David Fletcher

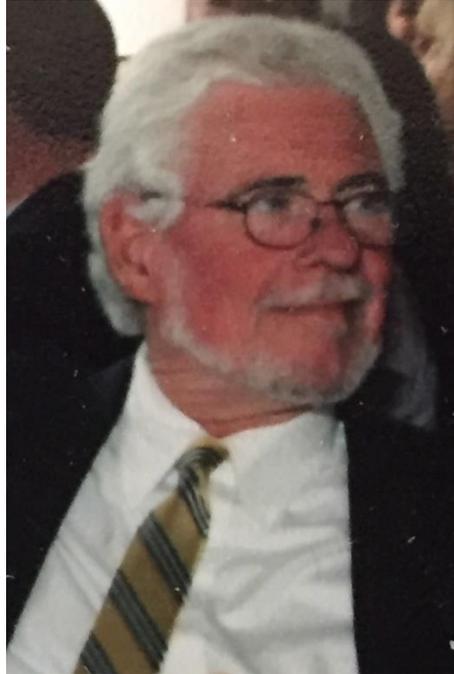
Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/esohc>

Recommended Citation

Fletcher, David, "Heffernan, James Oral History Interview" (2015). *Emeriti Society Oral History Collection*. 63.
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/esohc/63>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emeriti Society Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.

FACULTY EMERITI INTERVIEWS
UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC ARCHIVES



James D. Heffernan (1972-2014)
Professor of Philosophy
Department Chair

July 21, 2015

By David Fletcher

Transcription by Jade Vo, University of the Pacific,
Department of Special Collections, Library

Subjects: The path to Pacific, contributions including innovations and new courses, Department of Philosophy, student trends, and changes and impact of administration. Changes in Pacific over time including: ethnic make-of students, use of technology, and community involvement.

UOP ARCHIVES FACULTY EMERITI INTERVIEWS

Fletcher: Okay, this is David Fletcher interviewing James Heffernan on July 21, 2015, for the Emeriti project. We're in the University Library. You were a faculty member the entire time you were at Pacific, right? You didn't have any administrative positions?

Heffernan: I was a faculty member for 42 years. In addition, I was Chair of the Department for 23 years.

Fletcher: Yes, okay, can we talk a little bit about how you happened to come here?

HEFFERNAN: I spent my early years in the snow country of upstate New York. I started college there as a chemistry major but ultimately found my philosophy classes more alluring (who wouldn't want to prove the existence of God?). I spent a few years in the Jesuit seminary but dropped out in 1965 probably because I took the East Coast blackout as a sign of a dark future. I earned a BA in chemistry and an MA in philosophy from Fordham University. I met a wonderful Sicilian girl from Brooklyn during my Master's comprehensives, my wife, Maria. We settled in Syracuse. Since I was unsure of the wisdom of pursuing a career in philosophy, I accepted a job offer from IBM, where I spent several years programming the new IBM360 for various clients. Eventually my fondness for philosophy reasserted itself and Maria and I set out for Indiana and Notre Dame in Indiana where my IBM experience led to a Ph.D. in philosophy of artificial intelligence (whether machines can really think). In my last year at Notre Dame it came time to seek a job. A casual glance at a bulletin board at a philosophy convention revealed a job opening at a place called University of the Pacific. It stated that they needed someone who had a concentration in philosophy of science and an undergraduate degree in some scientific field. The job description seemed made for me. A trip to California sealed the deal – especially the warm weather, the sun, and the beautiful hills as I rode from San Francisco to Stockton. In August of 1972 my wife, then pregnant with our son Dan (native born Stocktonian), and I abandoned the snow and humidity and came to Pacific. This job meant a lot to me for a variety of reasons. One, my mother had grown up in Arizona. I spent a lot of my boyhood poring over Arizona Highways magazines and thinking, "Boy it would be so cool to be in that area." Two, I was born and raised in Syracuse, New York- one of the gloomiest cities in the country- and I had a job offer on the West Coast, where you could see the sun for most of the year. I was just ecstatic. So that's how I got to Pacific. Thus began a 42 year long love affair with teaching philosophy.

Fletcher: When you came into the department, you said the faculty got along well. Was there anybody in particular that you felt helped you?

Heffernan: Everybody did in some sense. Certainly Herb Reinelt, Gwen Browne and later Jerry Hewitt were most helpful. Herb and his wife actually offered my wife and me temporary

housing, helped orient us to the university community and enabled us to get to know Stockton. The connections they facilitated resulted not only in some life-long friendships but in enhancing my ability to make inter-disciplinary connections. Most notably, was my relationship with Jerry Hewitt who taught in the Political Science Department but was very interested in introduction to philosophy. We team taught that class for several years which increased both my knowledge of philosophy and skills in teaching.

Herb and Gwen watched me teach, provided me feedback and appeared satisfied with my beginning efforts. This was incredibly useful for a new teacher.

Fletcher: So if you think back to the department itself, can you point to some innovations or courses that you started.

Heffernan: I was responsible for initiating the course on environmental ethics. I was the first person to put it into the curriculum and teach this class. Another class I initiated was "The Meaning of Life." Both of these classes were very popular with the students. A class I initiated that was interdisciplinary was "Artificial Intelligence". I team-taught this class with Coby Ward a member of the Mathematics Department. Although a small class, students appeared interested in it. Later, I was part of a group with Larry Spreer, a chemistry professor, and you, a professor in the School of Engineering in developing a science component for what later became the mentoring program. In terms of innovations, it was my belief that philosophy should be made accessible to all students. I learned that I liked teaching beginners new skills. I tried to give students the sense that their philosophical thoughts mattered. I did this by making clear for the students the connections between philosophical issues and their concerns in their everyday life. I used current movies to illustrate those connections. I started collecting film clips with short philosophical moments that conveyed the idea that philosophy is something that everyone can become involved in. I used this approach in my most successful classes – Introduction to Philosophy, Environmental Ethics and The Meaning of Life. This approach appealed to a wide range of students and brought more students into philosophy classes, resulting in an increased number of students interested in majoring in philosophy.

Fletcher: In all the time you were working on these, you basically had free reign to do pretty much as you wished, right?

Heffernan: Yes. In those days there was a far lighter load than anyone has now. We were mainly left alone except in minor ways. Administration during that time was more interested in and focused on football, so there wasn't much going on in the way of scrutiny. So this enabled us to have a lot of freedom in initiating classes that we were interested in and forming collaborations to team teach.

Fletcher: Okay. How did the overall department fare in that period of time? Did enrollment stay pretty steady?

Heffernan: I wasn't very aware of enrollment as a concern until the Provost, in the mid-nineties, started to have Program Reviews. All of a sudden I had to pay a lot of attention to our enrollment. If our numbers were low, we risked losing philosophy as a major. The fact that I didn't like having small classes and always looked for ways to get larger classes helped our Department. If a class was too small, students could sabotage the class by simply not coming, so I looked for ways to have large numbers of students so I wouldn't care if they were there or not. I was successful. I consistently had large numbers of students enroll in my classes and that really helped the department FTE quota. This kept us going for a long time. We always had lots of students. More students wanted to major in philosophy and a number of them were able to get into graduate school in philosophy. I remember one student in particular. I had asked him, "So what do you want out of life?" and he said, "I want to do what you do." (Laughs). This approach fit right in with Program Review and enabled us to prove that we (philosophy) were a viable part of the curriculum.

Fletcher: Well that's not all that bad.

Fletcher: Why don't you talk a little bit about your 23 years as Chair of the Department, since that was your principal administrative responsibility?

Heffernan: Administration was never one of my interests. I became Chair by default since none of my colleagues were interested in the position. We had three full-time staff and two part-time adjuncts from other departments who helped us out with special courses such as political theory and history of philosophy. The field of philosophy, itself, did not require ongoing revision of curriculum. New courses would be taught if one of us had a particular interest in doing so. Later, as the Department expanded and new members were added, their interests were reflected in the course lineup. Nowadays, I think, the Departments have to revise curriculum more frequently and strenuously because of the push towards being able to have a career at the end of your studies.

Fletcher: Well, I think a lot of people look at the development in recent times as a question of: are you a service unit or are you providing direction towards employment? I think most departments don't like particularly as simply service units.

Heffernan: I guess we didn't mind. We always stressed to our majors and students interested in majoring in philosophy that they needed to have a second major since getting into graduate school and finding a job in the field was challenging. We saw philosophy as a life changer not a job changer.

Fletcher: Okay, so I know that you loved meetings of all sorts (laughs), but were you ever really involved in University governance?

Heffernan: I was on the COP Council early on. I was happy to serve on COP committees for a while, but then they got more tactical.

Fletcher: So you must have been one of the humanities representatives on the COP council?

Heffernan: Yes, but the Council did not have much influence at that time. There was a different management model in those days. You could say that management and staff who were either teaching or Chairs essentially operated independently. They “did their thing” and we did our own. There was a lot more freedom and less scrutiny.

Fletcher: Once accrediting agencies changed over to a more data-driven learning outcome model, it made everybody’s life more difficult. The administrative response had been to add more administrators who made more work for the faculty to do in terms of documenting everything, so that’s sort of part and parcel of how that has changed. Did you have any other administrative responsibilities in governance, other university-wide committees, research, promotion or tenure?

Heffernan: I was on a couple of committees, but I considered my work as Chair to be my major contribution to administration.

Fletcher: Fair enough. So let’s talk about the people at Pacific. You taught there for a very long time, 42 years. So who are the people you would point out as being particularly memorable while you were there? Who had a lot of influence on you?

Heffernan: Many people. Although I had taught some classes at Notre Dame as a TA and thus had some teaching experience, my early years as a teacher at Pacific were rocky. It took me a while to get clear on how to teach, how to make philosophy interesting and how to have fun with it. A friend in the Psychology Department, Marty Gibson, offered to help me out. A student in my class filmed a few of my lectures, Marty and I watched the films and he made suggestions: “You should engage the students more” or “You should explain that concept more carefully.” With Marty’s help, I began to become a better teacher.

Jerry Hewitt and I team-taught Introduction to Philosophy for several years. Jerry taught mostly in the Political Science Department. His Ph.D. studies in graduate school were very similar to those I had been exposed to, Aristotle and Plato. We learned a lot from each other.

Pat Jones and I shared an interest in chemistry and he routinely promoted my classes to his pre-dent and pre-pharm students. He has become a loyal and life-long friend.

Carl Wulfman was another person who made an impression on me. We developed a rewarding friendship at that time. He was part of the “cynics” group where a number of us talked about important, mundane and silly ideas. We did a lot of hiking and backpacking in those days. Our hiking group including Herb, Pat Jones, Glen Albaugh, and Ron Pulleyblank. Wulfman always proposed what we would do but never could go. So we used to call the annual back pack, “the annual Carl Wulfman Backpack without Wulfman” (laughs).

Herb Reinelt and I got along pretty well for a while until I switched from a transcendental to a naturalistic approach. In the beginning, Herb and I were on the same page, Transcendentalism. I began to divide the philosophical world into two spheres, the naturalistic and the transcendental. Transcendental philosophers say that God is a being that cannot be seen yet exists. As a Saturday Night Live comedian once said, the invisible and the non-existent are very similar. The Naturalist believes that the only things we can talk about are the things we can

grasp through our senses. Once I fell prey to that side, Herb and I were no longer on the same page.

Ron Pulleyblank, a professor in the Engineering Department, became a great friend, companion in hiking and was a great challenger to my early beliefs in Transcendentalism. He certainly helped me move in the opposite direction.

Fletcher: What would you say about the trend in students over the time that you were here?

Heffernan: In the beginning of my teaching career, I had this naive attitude that many of the students were lazy. I decided that was not the attitude I wanted to have, it was my job to get them interested in and excited about philosophy. So I devised a structure for my Introduction to Philosophy class and tried to make it very simple and entertaining. For example, I said there are basically two kinds of philosophy. Nihilism, but that's not really a philosophy. We joked about it in 500 different ways. Nihilism- there's nothing to it. Then I presented the model I mentioned above. First, Transcendentalism which was held by people who tended to believe in things like the possibility of God and an afterlife. Second, Naturalism which posits that there is nothing beyond this world and what we accomplish in this lifetime. This approach worked. Students would start thinking about whether they were one or the other. Every course I taught after that period was based on this model: here are a few possibilities and what do you think about them? It kept most of my students interested. So it is fair to say that my students did not change over time but my attitude toward them and approach to get them interested in thinking changed.

In my early years, few students seemed interested in becoming philosophy teachers. The population consisted of mostly Caucasian students. As time passed, more and more students became interested in philosophy as a major or minor. Lou Matz, who came into the department in the late 90s, got a lot of students enough interested in philosophy to seek graduate work. Ray Rennard, the current Chair, has had a lot of success in interesting students as well. I did see a trend in the career preferences and ethnic populations across the years. In my early years, most of our students were interested in careers in law and we were successful in sending them off to law school. A lawyer who came through our program, Peter Rausch, gave a talk to our philosophy majors one year. He said, "I really value my philosophy education because it taught me one, to be able to read things I didn't necessarily understand and two, to realize that there are two sides to every issue and that I needed to be on top of both because you never knew who's coming through the door."

During my earlier years at Pacific the ethnic make-up of our students changed with influxes of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao students. For these students, science-related careers were the way to go including dentistry, pharmacy and medical school. It was clear to them that teaching philosophy was not a career goal that was easily attainable. The trend was to support obtaining good careers while profiting from exposure to the great thinkers and encouraging students to think.

Fletcher: Now what about at the finish of your career, what did you think about that?

Heffernan: One thing I noticed was that the ethnic make-up during my last few years had changed again. Perhaps three-fourths of my students were Korean. All of them seemed determined to pursue a career in the sciences of some sort—mostly, dentistry or pharmacy.

Fletcher: Pre-wealth curriculum (laughs).

Heffernan: Yes. That was the kind of change that we saw. Unlike some of the students in my early years, virtually all of the Asian students were willing to do the work.

Fletcher: Now did you have much ... well you did have quite a bit of interaction with other faculty outside because you were involved in the development of the mentor program and you taught a lot in that program. So if you look at how the faculty has changed over the time you've been here, how would you characterize that change?

Heffernan: The biggest change I see is that there seems to be very little cross-discipline camaraderie. In the past, faculty from other disciplines could be seen chatting and sharing ideas on a daily basis at lunch and around campus. I think part of the reason that there was so much interaction was the fact that we were not a "publish or perish" place. Now it seems as though it is the only thing that matters.

Fletcher: Well yes, I think that it certainly has become much more important. I don't know if I'd say it's the only thing that matters, but the difficulty remains that it's a very difficult change and we still don't have any good ways of evaluating the things that we thought were most important when we were active on the faculty. How about the administrators? Administrations have come and gone and we've had every style imaginable over the years.

Heffernan: Well I have a skewed view. My preference has always been for minimal interference from administration. I thought the McCaffrey era represented the golden years. Basically, he left us alone; he hardly ever saw us. The DeRosa era produced some very beneficial changes including getting rid of football, facilitating building improvement and increasing available dormitories. At the same time, extra work was imposed on the faculty, program reviews being the most prominent one. That was cumbersome for Chairs to do while at the same time carrying out all their other responsibilities. The effectiveness of the philosophy program, I believe, lay in the fact that people carried what they learned about themselves, their world and how they thought about things with them for the rest of their life. It seemed to me that the types of assessments we were expected to carry out were less credible for philosophy majors, a small group in and of itself, as the program's impact could only be measured over time.

Fletcher: It's so different from areas in which there's pretty much a prescribed curriculum that has to do with accreditation. That was, unfortunately, the model because people think they can

quantify it in some meaningful way. Ultimately, I don't think they can, even in engineering, but that's a whole different attitude. Did you have anything much to do with regents at all while you were here? How about alumni and donors?

Heffernan: No

Fletcher: Okay. You were talking earlier about being left alone, back in the golden era of McCaffrey and so forth, so I take it that you would say that the working relationships have changed fairly dramatically and the administrators are now placing very specific expectations on faculty in terms of non-teaching things.

Heffernan: Yes. I don't know if I have the right to make that claim with any kind of force, but that is how it seems to me. I really wonder if I were coming into the field now, as I was when I was 30, and understood the expectations of faculty, and the "publish or perish" atmosphere, whether I would choose this field. My love has been teaching, sharing ideas with young people and getting them excited about the important questions on a personal level. Why am I here? What do I want the purpose of my life to be? How do I want to interact with others? What responsibility do I have to nature? Would I let myself get into this job, now? Money can be a pressure, I guess in some cases, but I just don't know. It seems to me that it has been so hard on Ray Rennard, the current Chair. There are very few full-time positions and more and more there is a reliance on adjunct faculty. So he is constantly having to bring in new staff.

Heffernan: In many ways, I feel that it is too bad that I left. I really miss teaching but I don't miss all of the non-teaching expectations. I haven't yet found a good substitute.

Fletcher: Let's talk a little about Environmental Science and Environmental Studies Programs because you had a lot to do with the development of those. Tell us a little about how that started and who the major players were.

Heffernan: After I completed graduate work, I continued to read articles and papers written by my former professors. My thesis advisor had begun to write articles about environmental issues. These articles prompted me to begin reading more and more about environmental issues. I also had begun to spend time hiking, backpacking, and camping. I really developed a love for and appreciation of nature. In addition, I spent a lot of time talking to students. A student came up to me and said, "Why don't we have a major in Environmental Studies, they have it at Santa Cruz." She told me that if she could not get the major at Pacific she would transfer to Santa Cruz. And I thought, "Here we're going to lose a student if we don't have one, so let's explore whether we can." I started looking at catalogues from UC Santa Cruz to see what courses they offered. I noticed that we had faculty at Pacific who were offering courses that dealt with environmental issues including Bill Herrin (Economics), Curt Kramer (Geology), and Michael Hatch (Public Policy).

Fletcher: Did you have someone from Biology in that group?

Heffernan: We did not have someone from biology willing to commit to this core group. But we decided that many of the biology classes had clear connections to environmental issues. The core committee were the people mentioned above and when we developed the environmental studies program we specified that students had to take at least one class in biology. Basically we modeled our program on the one offered by Santa Cruz. We had the same kinds of classes and the same credit allocation.

Fletcher: What would you say about the overall success of the Environmental Studies Program?

Heffernan: I think it was very successful. Students majored in the field, went to graduate schools and many of them got full-time positions in the field.

Fletcher: One of the things I remember is that you were a pretty early adopter of classroom technology and you used a lot of it in the classroom. How did that develop over your time here?

Heffernan: I came to teaching with a background in systems engineering and a life-long interest in electronics, games, and movies. So it was kind of a natural for me to use video tapes initially and later clips that I made from movies to incorporate into my lectures. There were many changes in technology over the years I taught. The main reason I used this approach, I think, was that it was a way to make philosophical ideas more interesting and accessible. I was tuned in to film during my years teaching. I could pick out sections to illustrate philosophical issues in just about every movie I saw. In many cases the actors, themselves, were engaged in philosophical discussions. In other cases, the roles they adopted and the themes played out were those we were exploring in class. There is no doubt that movies made a lot of difference in terms of the interest of students. It was definitely fun for me and I think a lot of the students considered my classes some of the highlights of their time at Pacific because of my approach. I often used Woody Allen clips. Did you ever see Love and Death?

Fletcher: Yes.

Heffernan: Well, the conversation between Sonia and Boris is a good example of a philosophical discussion in a movie.

Boris: Sonia, what if there is no God?

Sonia: Boris (Dimitrievich), are you joking?

Boris: What if we're just a bunch of absurd people who are running around with no rhyme or reason?

Sonia: But if there is no God, life has no meaning. Why go on living? Why not just commit suicide?

Boris: Well, let's not get hysterical, I might be wrong.

Woody Allen was a great source of this stuff and he's still doing it. So using film to illustrate philosophical ideas and stimulate student's thinking was something I really enjoyed.

Fletcher: Did you get the support you needed in those respects or not?

Heffernan: In terms of the kinds of support I received, in my early years while I was using videotapes, there was an assistant in the back of the classroom who ran the tapes. I didn't have to do all the work. Eventually, I did have to do all the work including reserving and picking up equipment, changing formats as technology changed. I had to redo all of the movie clips I had made for classes as formats changed. It was challenging, hard to get the equipment working right. I usually wound up calling IT to get help.

Fletcher: When you were a faculty member and Chair of the Department, did you have a lot of advisees?

Heffernan: Yes, a fair number. For a period I had all the advisees. Almost all of the majors were my advisees. It was not heavily burdensome.

Fletcher: So how many people are we talking about? Twenty?

Heffernan: Yes, at the most. That was not a burden. I enjoyed the contact with the students.

Fletcher: Now when you think about the University and how it has changed over the time you've been here, what would you say about the perceived quality of the institution?

Heffernan: I think the quality has improved over time. Mainly I think that this has occurred because there are many more serious students than there used to be. Students who are pharmacy-bound or interested in attending dental schools have raised the bar for other students as they are willing to do the work needed to get good grades.

Fletcher: Now have you been paying any attention to the sort of push toward an online presence?

Heffernan: I think Paul Hauben, a colleague, said, "You're lucky you're getting out of here now." I never wanted to be part of teaching online at all. My younger colleagues did it and are still doing it, I just can't believe it's as effective as face to face contact nor would it have been as satisfying for me. When you have students in front of you, you can better gauge their levels of interest and understanding and make appropriate adjustments.

Fletcher: Well, I just can't imagine how you could take something like philosophy or engineering design and really provide mentoring that a student needs to develop their thinking about those things with an online course.

Heffernan: When you are taking an online course there are so many distractions, so many easy things to get interested in rather than the course work. Ray Rennard teaches logic online during the summer. He says that there is a lot of attrition. Lots of students just disappear and don't

complete the class. I'm sure that is because many students do not have the discipline to structure their time and stay focused. I think there was nothing better while I was teaching logic than to have lots of suffering students around to help each other.

Fletcher: one of the things that I found very useful over the years was to really involve students in the class and to hold them accountable for that by making it part of their grade, so if they came to class unprepared or unwilling to talk about what we were doing that was going to have a negative impact on their evaluation. That was ultimately very helpful because I got to the point where I had students who would look at the amount of work it would take to do an assignment and then decide, "Well it's only worth ten points, "I'm not doing it," kind of thing. That's a bit of a problem if you're an engineer.

Heffernan: Yeah, I'd bet.

Fletcher: So what was your interaction with the community through the University? Did you get involved in things in the community?

Heffernan: A little. Lou Matz and I did a stripped down version of Introduction to Philosophy for two community groups. We used some of the movie clips I had put together for my classes. The first group included local Licensed Marriage, Family Therapists. My wife and her colleagues were all in attendance. For some of them it was their first exposure to philosophical material and all of them reported enjoying the presentation. As with my students, the group reported that the movie clips greatly enhanced both understanding and enjoyment. The second presentation was for a group of County employees. A good number of people attended and in general we received good reviews.

Fletcher: So what do you think about the relationship between Pacific and the local community? Has it gotten better or worse over your time? What do you think?

Heffernan: I think that the relationship between Pacific and the community has gotten much better. There has been a major commitment to Pacific having a community presence since Dr. Eibeck became President. I understand that the major push has been with the "Beyond our Gates" meetings where representatives from school districts and other community leaders come together to discuss efforts to improve education for children so that all children are reading by the third grade. The pharmacy students have a "take back" unused drugs effort yearly. They also have an annual event to help folks review their current drugs, insurance programs, and give immunizations if needed. My wife and I participated in both of these events last year and found them very helpful.

Fletcher: Have you ever thought of doing anything with the Office of Lifelong Learning?

Heffernan: Yes, I have thought about it. I've talked myself out of it for various reasons. One reason is that I like to have weekends free (laughs). But I may, you never know. I was thinking of doing something. ... I don't know if it would be through Lifelong Learning. I thought about doing something at O'Connor Woods about facing death. What I would do is simply explore

how different philosophers approached the idea of death. There's a lot of pretty interesting stuff. You have the Epicurean approach which says death is nothing to worry because when I'm here death is not, when death comes I am not. Spinoza's thoughts are that there is no point thinking about death at all. It will come, but it's nothing to be concerned about. Mostly, you should focus on doing things that you can do and keep doing them until it is simply impossible. I think that is probably how I'd approach it.

Fletcher: How has your career here met your expectations? How would you summarize that?

Heffernan: It's the best job I could ever have gotten. I would like to end by repeating that I have had a 42 year love affair with teaching philosophy. In 1983, after earning tenure, promotion and a sabbatical leave, I was appointed Chair of the Philosophy Department, a position I held for 23 years. In 2005, I was proud to receive the Spanos Award for excellence in teaching. It's been a wonderful ride over the past 42 years since Herb Reinelt and Gwenn Browne offered me a job at Pacific and I feel cosmically lucky to have pursued this career. I had exactly the career that I wanted...the only problem is it's over (laughs).

Fletcher: Well, that happens to all of us.

Heffernan: Yes, it does.