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Introducing the Interim Dean

Sherril Soman stepped into the role of Interim Dean of the College of Education this August. She first joined Grand Valley State University in 2000 as an assistant professor in the chemistry department and has since served in a number of different roles at the university, most recently as Associate Vice President and University Registrar.

Colleagues staff sat down with Interim Dean Soman to discuss her experiences at GVSU and what she is looking forward to in this new role.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

- Years at GVSU: Joined GVSU in the Chemistry Department in 2000
- Education: Ph.D. in Chemical Education from Purdue University
- Research Interests: Chemical education, in particular misconceptions and conceptual change

When did you arrive at GVSU and what was your role then?

I started my faculty position in 2000 as an assistant professor in the chemistry department. I also was the general chemistry coordinator, so my job was partly administrative when I started. I was responsible for curriculum develop-



Interim Dean Sherril Soman, Ph.D.

ment and organization of the freshman sequences courses for chemistry majors.

What roles have you served since then?

I have served in a variety of roles, including the typical faculty roles such as committees. I participated in curriculum development for my college and department and served in this role when we had recertification or changes that needed to be made. For example,

in 2004, I was involved in revising our program for the Michigan Department of Education. The American Chemical Society also periodically requires us to change how we're delivering our curriculum, and I have been involved in those efforts as well. I also was a part of the group that developed a Master's concentration in chemistry for the Master of Education through the COE, which has now changed to the science concentration. So I've done a lot of curriculum development.

I've also served in a number of administrative roles. My curriculum experience led to me becoming a sabbatical replacement for Maria Cimitile, then Associate Dean for Students and Curriculum in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Cimitile is now the Provost). After that, we shared a position as Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs in the Office of the Provost while the person in that role was out on an ACE fellowship for a year. After that I

was asked to serve as Director of Financial Aid, which I did for about eight months. Then I went back to teaching for about a year or so until I was asked to serve as the Registrar in 2012.

How have those multiple, varied roles shaped how you know and see GVSU?

When I started in the chemistry department, we were a division of science and math before re-organization to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which meant we brought in other disciplines that were not traditional science disciplines. So then our college curriculum committee included subjects like history and anthropology. This gave me an opportunity to see curriculum not just the way we do it in science but from other disciplines as well.

As Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs, I was involved in directing advising for the university. Having an understanding of the curriculum process helped me understand what professional advisors would need to work with students, as well as what support systems needed to be in place for students, in order to effectively deliver that curriculum.

Financial aid was a completely different world. That role helped me see how skill sets can be transferred to different types of roles. I was hired for my experience and abilities in reorganization and managing personnel.

Most recently, as Registrar, I was involved in the implementation of policy. That office deals with every aspect of a student's time at Grand Valley, from application to graduation. So then I was working to create and implement policies around curriculum and supporting students.

Everything I've chosen to do has something to do with how the institution affects students and how we deliver curriculum. It wasn't an intentional pathway, but everything is tied together. There aren't many people who have gone along this type of path. But if the position involved students and figuring out how I can help set up systems, organizations, or structures to assist students, I'm all about doing it.

What makes GVSU unique?

I came to GVSU because I wanted to be in a place where

students are a priority. Everything we do is based on what needs to happen in order to prepare students for whatever they are going to do next. We are a big school, but it feels so much smaller because of our focus on the students. We're not looking at them as just a mass of 25,000 students. Each individual student matters.

How do you think GVSU has been able to create that culture?

We have students involved at every part of the process. For example, the Registrar's Office has about 50 student workers. In my previous role as Registrar, I was able to provide them with professional development to help prepare students to go out into the world. As an institution, we're preparing students academically through their classes. But the Registrar's Office also helped prepare them to be a professional. Student workers were required to attend two out of three seminars each semester. These seminars dealt with topics like diversity, financial management, professionalism, and career preparation.

There are opportunities everywhere at GVSU to serve students and that mentality permeates throughout the institution. We have our students involved in everything. Students are at the forefront for us.

How does your background in chemistry education help position you to lead the COE?

My background in chemistry education and educational research around how students learn have really positioned me well. Through this research and the courses I've taught, I understand it's not just about the content knowledge but also how you teach and present the information so your students can learn. Also, how do you assess what you're teaching? Did the students get it and how do you know that they did? To that end, my program development and evaluation work ties in very neatly for me.

I'm sure that I don't know everything that happens here and I'm looking forward to finding out more. But the small pieces that I have from my experience in chemistry education gives me a good springboard to know the right questions to ask. So I'm looking forward to asking a lot of questions and I'm excited to learn about the things people are doing here in the College of Education.