



In-Depth

Adnan Valdes, Development Associate (journalism) interviewed Ms Amy Seefeldt, Dean of Academics this September. Read the interview.

What is it exactly that you do; what's your position, and what does it consist of?

The main responsibilities that I have are to track the academic progress of students; and then also to assist teachers with whatever tools they need; to try to provide support and professional development for them. But the biggest part of my responsibility is students who are struggling, and then hopefully also students who need a little bit more pushing. So, like the psychology class that you're hoping to do, to try to provide more opportunity and things like that. I also make sure that the curriculum is in order.

What have been your previous experiences related to your current job?

First of all, I have been teaching since 1999. So, this is my eleventh year. At my last job I was head of the history department for five years at another high school in Atlanta. That experience helped me learn how to supervise. I also think that having grown up here helps me a lot; I feel like I understand what students struggle with, and that kind of thing.

From which class did you graduate?

[I graduated] from the class of 1993. I came in 1996, when I was in sixth grade, and stayed 'till I graduated.

Did Mr. Seefeldt, your father, study here?

Yes, he did. Both my parents studied here. So did I.

Moving on, what is your philosophy on life, on your work, on how you approach all these things?

My philosophy on education is centred on two ideas; one is that I think at the centre of human existence is a search for purpose and for meaning, and I believe an education equips people to carry out that search effectively, to actually find a purpose and meaning. I think my role as a teacher is to help students explore how to find meaning and purpose in life, and to equip them with that. It is about developing skills, but the skills only serve the search for purpose; it's not skills just for the sake of skills, if that makes sense. So that's one part of my philosophy.

The other part is that a lot of education is about planting little seeds, which I know sounds very trite, but I think a lot of times when you're 15 or 16 you don't even know what you'll need later on, 'cause you don't know what you want to do with your life. But my role as a teacher, and our role as a school, is to plant all these little seeds that can later on bear fruit when is the right time. I feel very strongly that education is about the whole person, not just learning how to read, as important as that is. Does that make sense?

Can you talk about your experiences in Woodstock; how you see it, what do you think of the school?

I think the goal seems to be to create 'global citizens,' but what that actually looks like needs to be formed more clearly. I think we have a really engaged and driven student body, and that's really what makes the school. If students were not engaged, if they didn't desire to learn and to take part in all the activities that we have, the school wouldn't function. So I think it really is the students who drive the school, and I feel that more and more clearly the longer I work here. I think it's a very complicated school culture, which means there are many exiting opportunities, but can also get very tricky because it's so complicated. For example, the fact that we all live here, and that our whole life is basically the school.

But wouldn't that happen in any boarding school?

I think it happens more at Woodstock because of the isolation of the campus, and also because of the sheer number of activities at the school. For example, an average day for me starts at 7:30 am at school here, and I don't leave until seven-thirty, eight nine pm. Which is long, there's no time for anything else, and that can be really good when it's good, but can also be really bad when it's bad.

I suppose you enjoy being here at Woodstock, then.

Yes, I *really* enjoy the students. I really enjoy all my interactions with them, and I find now that being in a classroom is the easiest part of my day. It's fun! And that's when the most exiting conversations happen with the students, because we're talking about history.

You've been here for a long time; your father studied here, and so did you. So how would you describe the way Woodstock has changed over the years?

Actually, I think it has changed far less than people think it has. We have a lot fancier gym now than the one we had when I was a student; we have a lot fancier pool than we did when I was a student. In general the facilities are a lot better than they were when I was a student. The food's a lot better. But, and even when I came back to teach two years ago, I was telling myself, "Okay, be careful. You probably don't have anything in common with these students now, so don't think that you do; Woodstock's changed, it's a different place, you better be ready for that." But from the first day that I was back in the classroom, I thought like "Oh! I understand these students. These are the same students that were here when I was here!" So, I think the same things matter to Woodstock students now that mattered to students 20 years ago.

Could you expand on that?

Woodstock students, for the most part, like to learn' they are interested in the rest of the world; they like to argue and they're not afraid to voice their opinion. They want to, I think, even when they can't always follow through on things, Woodstock students want to make a difference in the world; they want to make it a better place. And that's a very deep desire here, to a greater degree than in other places, and that's very reassuring to me.

Do you think this happens because of the things that are taught here, or is it a tradition for people who join Woodstock to absorb its culture?

Probably a combination. You'd have to be a really cold, hard person to live in a place like this, with facilities nobody else in the city has, and natural beauty that is at risk of

being destroyed, you'd have to be really cold and hard to live in that kind of environment and not care about doing something to help the community around you, doing something to restore environment around you. I think it's a place which makes you recognize your elite position, and then also the responsibility that it brings with it. Part of what cultivates that desire to make a difference is, I think, the open nature of the discussions that happen; people don't hold back. I see Woodstock students with really strong opinions and they get into arguments with each other about how to fix things, and whether things *can* be fixed, and I think that's actually what's cultivating both the desire to make a difference and the questioning of *how* can that possibly be done.

I imagine that sometimes you have to involve yourself with other teachers, for example your activities with the Development Office and its associates. Does communication become a problem at times, between departments or even just teachers?

It can be, sure. I think everybody's busy; everybody feels like they're doing more than perhaps they signed up for. So every time I have to ask teachers to do one more thing, I have to ask it carefully, recognizing the burden that they're already carrying, and again, what makes it both exiting and complicated, are the diverse educational backgrounds of the teachers themselves. So teachers come with very different ideas about how to assess student progress, what the grading scale should be. Some people come and are horrified that an 80 is an "A" because it's so low, for an "A," and other people are horrified at that because an 80 is high for an "A." Some people think a semester exam should be the only assessment that students get, and other people come believing that students should be assessed regularly throughout the year so that they know how they're doing. So trying to bring all these different educational backgrounds and philosophies together into a coherent system, that makes sense to students, so that students are not getting confusing messages, I think it's really hard. The way I try to do it is trying to think about what's best for students; what will help students learn, what will bring clarity for students.

You mentioned that many teachers seem to be doing more than they signed up for, that they have a lot more responsibilities. Do you think they enjoy this, or is it a burden?

I think it really depends on the person, and, I think, there's no possible way to communicate to people before they arrive here what an intense community this is, compared to wherever it is that they come from, because, I think, most people are used to having a job where they go during the day and then they come back at night. For example, many teachers who come here have never ever had students in their home before, because it's just not something that you do in most parts of the world. In fact sometimes it can be frowned upon, that you're being too familiar with the students. So to come here and have that be an expectation as part of your job is an adjustment for a lot of people. And some see it as an opportunity, and others see it as kind of an invasion of their privacy. That balance is hard.

