

## INTERVIEW ON LEADERSHIP

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Interview conducted by PhD candidate Alex Kudryavtsev  
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My name is Kathryn Boor, and I'm the Ronald P. Lynch Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Science at Cornell University. I took on this role on July 1st, 2010 after having been the Chair of the Food Science Department on the Cornell campus.

### *How did you become a leader?*

I think I never actually aspired to a leadership role. I have always been very happy in every job that I have had, including support roles in Cooperative Extension when I was in California. When it was clear that my supervisor at that time was going to retire, I realized I needed a PhD to move to the next level. I earned my PhD at UC-Davis, then accepted a faculty position at Cornell in 1994 – starting as an assistant and the first woman to be tenured in that department as a faculty member. Food science as a field has always been very male dominated as an industrial field. It's a funny observation, but all of the women's restrooms in Stocking Hall were add-ons, they were not in the design of the building. I don't know how good of a story that is, but you notice, "Oh, that was an afterthought." And it sends a message, you process that, you think about it.

So, I started as an assistant professor in 1994, and fairly quickly became the head of a very large laboratory that conducted applied and basic microbiology research relevant to food materials. And, as I was saying, I never really aspired to be the chair of the department per se. But the opportunity came along to lead the development of plans for the new Food Science building, and Dean Susan Henry put me in charge of that effort. And that was a successful effort, you see the building starting now. Then I worked closely with the Dean's office on strategic planning for the college and other defined tasks, which were very productive relationships. Then, when the chair of the Food Science department at that time was finished with his term – it seemed like a logical step for me to be the chair of that department – particularly as we were moving into the serious planning phase for that building. That was a position that I enjoyed very much. I had the opportunity to think about how we would structure the department, what our areas of focus would be in that department, where we would plan to make hires and build for the future, particularly in the context of the new physical building. Whether or not we would continue to make ice-cream – and similar decisions – these sound like small questions, but they are important questions because it determines where the department goes in the next fifty years. And that was incredibly exciting.

### *Is having a PhD enough to be a leader?*

A PhD is evidence that you can focus, that you can follow the rules to some extent, and make it over the hurdles, the barrier. It's something that takes dedication. But it does not necessarily mean that you can convince other people outside of your special committee that you have good ideas. The difference between getting a PhD and leading a laboratory is in your ability to convince other people that they want to work with you. This is how you build a laboratory and start a research team.

### *Can you give an example of how you worked with other people?*

I was already department chair, but had also led the beginning part of planning for the new Stocking Hall. We were faced with a very serious situation and needed to make big decisions. We had come up with our initial designs for the building, and I had instructed everyone to think big, to include in the plans everything that they could imagine, that they would want in a new building. And it came together very nicely. Then those plans went out for bid, and they were 20 million dollars more than we had to spend. So, now the difficult situation was, "How do we restructure our dreams, so that we can still have the building that we need, without compromising the future and in a way where we can agree?"

In academics, and probably everywhere, it is extremely important to listen to people, to make sure that you understand their point of view, and to take that into account in a very respectful way when you are making your decisions and presenting the new plans. To reduce the cost of the new building, we worked with people in different focal areas in Food Science: Food and Health, Food Microbiology, and Food Engineering. In each area they were given a target for the reduction of the cost. Each team had to work to reduce the square footage, and to come up with a consensus with regard to what they will eliminate from the plan. And then we got back together, and we agreed on the areas that we would give up collectively.

***Is it task delegation?***

Absolutely. In general, you have to give people a task that they can imagine how to start. It's a hard thing to give people enough information, so they can start, and even better, give them an idea of what the final product must be, and then give them freedom in-between. On this campus we have very, very, very bright people, and you know that they will give you creative solutions. But you have to tell them what to start with and what to end with. So, each group had responsibility for the change that was needed to reduce their own space, it's kind of a painful responsibility. Then they would come back and ultimately it was my responsibility to make the final decisions with the input from all of the groups.

***As you moved from faculty to department chair, and from department chair to Dean of CALS, how do you think it impacted your relationships with your colleagues, friends and family?***

That's a really good question. One thing is that I have a family and children. And my life philosophy for a woman with a career is that you can have a life (meaning extracurricular activities), a career, and a family. I think you can have them all over the course of your life, but in any given time you can do two. So, I must embrace the two, and I embraced my family and my career. The extracurricular activities and deep friendships outside – that's not where I am right now. That will come, though. My younger son is almost finished with high school, and I think opportunities for hobbies and things like this will change.

My relationships within my family evolved as my children got older and were able to take more responsibilities. That was good timing because I was able to take different responsibilities. I think that's actually good for the children to see the evolution in a career. And they are very proud to be able to take on more responsibilities and to be more grown-up, and with the expectations that are higher, and they are helping the family. And with regards to my colleagues, I think it has been an interesting evolution because I'm actually one of the most recent hires in Food Science, still one of the newest hires in the department. That was quite an evolution to go from one of the babies to the chair in 14 years, and my colleagues had to adjust to that, as did I. As I moved through increasing responsibilities in the department – with the building and many things like that – to me it seemed like a fairly natural evolution. I understand from my colleagues that they were certainly very supportive of that evolution, and that's something for which I'm grateful. So, my focus has been really on the relationships at work and the relationships at home, and not so much on a bigger circle because of the limited time. And I certainly have friends, I have friends that I have had for a long time with whom I maintain very close ties, but right now not a lot of time is devoted to that.

***Were you nudged into your current position as Dean of CALS, or were you looking to expand your leadership?***

No. In fact, my dream is to go back to being a professor back in Food Science. I did not apply for this position. I was recruited almost exactly a year ago. I agreed to talk with the search committee and at the end of that conversation I thought that I was grateful for the interview. I think every interview is an opportunity to learn more about yourself and to see your institution in a different way, which I think is a really good thing. At the end of this interview I thought, "I don't think so. I'm happy in my job, we have so many things happening with the new building, so many things happening in my family, with my second son starting to be ready for college. I don't think so." Then people on the committee talked to me quite a bit, and encouraged me to at least try to go for the next level. And I went for the on-campus interview, and in doing that I realized that I was committed.

***How did you realize that?***

To put yourself through that sort of (interview) process you either commit yourself or you walk away. Right up until that on-campus interview I was still saying, “I don’t think so.” [laughing] We (CALS) are in a difficult time right now, very difficult time. It was clear to me that it would be best for this college to have someone to step into this position who had a long history being here, who understood the people, who worked with them, and understood the leadership. And I have worked with these people, I was on the strategic planning committee for the college. It was clear to me that it was a good idea to have someone drawn from our current faculty, not necessarily myself. And then when the list was revealed, among the four candidates I was the only one drawn from our faculty. All very good people, but I believed that we need someone from our college in that role. Then I saw it was me. That was it. I was committed.

***In your youth, did you have leadership role models?***

The most important thing I learned from my parents, who were local dairy farmers. To be a successful farmer, you must be a good businessperson. You must be not afraid to work hard. And you have to have faith in yourself. You have to believe you can do it. The most important thing I learned from my father was to have faith in myself, to believe that if I took on a job, I can do it. And that is by far, I think, the most important thing.

My father – even though he did not go to college – was very careful to watch the latest developments in his field. He was what you would call an early adopter. When the new technology would come out, he would consider it seriously. He was the very first in our entire county to have an automatic milking parlor for cows. This would have been in the early 1960s. This was a very big and risky deal because, from a financial perspective, it was a huge investment on the part of the family. He had to believe that this would be a better thing that would improve his ability to do this job, and he had to be willing to take that big risk – because financially and in every other way there is no backup for the entrepreneur. You have to believe, you have to have faith.

I remember watching my father and the milking parlors... Probably one of the best examples is where he made the decision to take down our poultry operation. He must have realized that the poultry industry was going down in New York State at that time. So, he decided to reinvest in the dairy side of our operation, instead. He invited the Fire Department to come burn down the old chicken coops for practice. That was genius. Fire Departments looked for old buildings to burn, so they could practice their technique. And then that was leveled, and this beautiful vision of the modern dairy industry emerged for the first time on our farm, right there. As I said, he was a person without college, but who had the vision. I admired his courage, I could see it even when I was young that he was brave enough to take risks and extend himself, but in intelligent ways.

***What is the most challenging for you in terms of decision making?***

Similar to my father’s story, the biggest difficulty is the uncertainty. The uncertainty is in wishing for the wisdom to make good choices because the choices we make now will commit this college to a trajectory for the next 20-30 years. Now, particularly, we are making decisions in the context of fewer resources. These are very big decisions. For example, the decision to close the Department of Education was a very big decision, very painful decision. But it was a decision that was important for the college and for the future of the college. And then to realign the faculty members from the Education Department in the context of the academic units that support the pedagogy and the teaching that they do. Of course, nobody is happy with decisions like that, but we have to be able to see the possibilities and the opportunities.

***Would you like to tell anything else to our future leaders?***

I think that the most important things that a leader can do, in general, are to listen and understand what is important to those with whom they are working. And another important thing for a leader – and it’s also something that I learned from my parents – is to try to avoid ever asking someone to do something that I would not do myself. It does not matter if it’s scrubbing floors or re-thinking how to structure a department, not to ask someone to do something that I would not do. That’s something that I’ve always thought about, those are some of the guiding principles.