

John Chapin Interview

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SPEAKERS

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Fatemeh Rezaei

This is Fatemeh Rezaei, it's June 13, 2024, at 11:30am. I am with John Chapin via the online Zoom platform, and we are going to begin our oral history interview for the University of Baltimore Stories, the 100th Anniversary Oral History Project. The purpose of this project is to celebrate the university's centennial by preserving the memory of those influenced by the University of Baltimore over the years, we will be creating a digital archive and exhibit and making these recordings available online. Thank you so much, John, for being here. And I'm going to start with some simple questions. And the first question is when and where were you born?

John Chapin

So, I was born outside of Philadelphia, in Upper Merion Township, and I don't even know, really, where that is, but that's what my birth certificate says.

Fatemeh Rezaei

And where did you grow up?

John Chapin

So, I grew up in Annapolis, Maryland, just 45 minutes south of Baltimore. My family moved to Maryland, before I was a year old. So, from age zero to, before I left for college, I lived entirely in Maryland, in a couple of different houses in Annapolis.

Fatemeh Rezaei

So, tell us about your family life, your sisters, your brothers, or anything you were willing to share about your family.

John Chapin

Sure. Let's see I am the middle of three brothers. And we grew up in, now it's a fairly busy area, near the Bay Bridge in Annapolis. If you're driving on Route 50, you will pass a big windmill that is a barbecue restaurant now. And that was called The Old Mill Pancake House. And it was pretty rural

back in there. We were 15 minutes from the town of Annapolis. But I was living on an apple orchard, and we were close to just acres and acres of soybean and corn. And it was very much a rural upbringing. Our neighbors weren't exactly farmers, even though there were farms next to it, it was kind of suburban homes in a bucolic setting. But it was country, and I went to public schooling, except for the first couple of years of school. I was in public school all the way from second grade to graduating from Annapolis High School.

Fatemeh Rezaei

So, how did you end up choosing to go to the University of Virginia for your undergrad?

John Chapin

So, I had absolutely no idea what I was doing and got zero help from my parents in the application process, or really anyone in my family. And I, very wisely, applied to Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and University of Virginia. So, I think that explains to you how I ended up going to the University of Virginia. I condescended to apply to a public university, because it seemed like a good idea to have a backup. My brother played football at UVA. And I had been to the campus several times and really liked it. So, I'm quite pleased, as it turns out that Harvard, Yale and Stanford's loss ended up I think, being really good for me.

Fatemeh Rezaei

At what point did you decide to major in anthropology and English? How did this happen?

John Chapin

I was always a really big reader. I mean, I loved reading. It's funny, as I've looked back on my childhood, I realized that so much of what I really liked, partly it was those were the things that people told me I was good at. And I think those reinforce each other. But I was always a big reader. And when I ended up, in high school, in English literature courses, I liked writing, and I loved reading and exploring literature seemed like an obvious place. You know, it seems like what I would obviously do, I didn't really have any questions about that. I got to college and took those literature courses and writing courses. And I really liked the writing courses. And I just decreasingly saw, I saw less and less value in, not in reading literature, but in the study of literature, and the way that you talk about literature. And I had been taking some anthropology courses, sort of upper division anthropology courses, and I absolutely loved them.

It taught me how to think but it also really connected with the way I was already thinking. So, they both kind of played off of each other. UVA at the time, and still is, had a big cultural anthropology program. And there were some fairly big names around, who I didn't realize were big names until I left school. But I fell in love with those classes. And then I looked at the English papers I'd been writing and getting kind of B pluses and minuses on, and I realized, those are all anthropology papers, I don't really understand the study of literature. And I don't really care about literature enough to study it. Flash forward 30 years, I'm a writing teacher and I'm teaching a lit course for the first time, very excited to teach the American novel. And the night before classes started, I thought, why do we do this? Why do we study literature? I had a degree in writing at the time, and I thought, I'm a reader. I am not a literary

scholar. But anthropology has very much grounded the way I think, especially cultural anthropology, which is really literary criticism masquerading as a social science.

Fatemeh Rezaei

What about your MFA? Why did you decide to continue your education?

John Chapin

I think I knew in college that I would be headed to grad school. And the last thing I wanted to do when I left college was start a degree program again. I had a few awful jobs. I was a door-to-door insurance salesman in rural Virginia. That was bad. And I did insurance and financial services for a few years. And it was a fine way to make a living, but it wasn't really very interesting to me. And I realized I was ready to head back to graduate school. I'd been writing a lot and publishing some. And that was really where I wanted to do my graduate work. So, I applied all over the country and ended up going to grad school in Richmond. So, I did not move for graduate school. I commuted an hour, from Charlottesville, where I stayed after undergraduate and went to grad school there.

I really liked my MFA program; it was a really fantastic way to spend a couple of years really focused on projects. I wrote a 570-page master's thesis novel, which I happily did not publish, because I don't think I would have done myself any favors with it. But spent a lot of time on that. And that was really great to be able to do. The reason I went to VCU was it was funded through a fellowship as a teacher. So, I'd be teaching freshman composition, and I would be working in the Writing Center. And those really were fascinating to me. I just really loved working in the Writing Center. I really wanted to teach writing, and I was a little disappointed and I thought I would be, naturally, a gifted teacher and I wasn't. And then the second year, I realized, "but you can practice and get better at it." And I really enjoyed it. It was really challenging. I loved working with students. I liked the sort of intellectual, academic environment and I always just really cared about writing and communication and those kinds of things.

Fatemeh Rezaei

So before working at University of Baltimore, you worked for several other universities, including Maryland and University of Illinois. Could you tell us about your experience working at other universities?

John Chapin

Sure. Let's see, I started as an adjunct at the University of Illinois at Chicago and at DePaul University in Chicago. And that was maybe eight years after leaving graduate school and living around the globe. I wanted to get back to teaching, which I really liked, and I wanted to get more of that practice in to become a better teacher. So, I got a lecturer position at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and I was teaching freshman Composition and freshman Composition Research Writing. And I really liked that research writing piece.

And I think it wasn't just trying to get students invested in writing, but it was asking them to conceive of, conduct, and complete a good-sized research project. And that was really fun. I think in the same way that I appreciated the time and energy I could put into projects in grad school, I got to do what I was wanting to do more as an undergraduate, which was really focused on these projects, and I was

helping students, kind of guiding them through projects. When you're teaching four sections of courses where there are 23 students per section, each one's writing a 10-page research paper, it's a lot to manage over time. But it was a really, it was a really fascinating thing to do. I taught several different things at the same time, one, the ill-fated literature class I taught, but the freshman Composition was good, and I really learned how to do that, and that served me well job wise, but I really liked to teaching Research Writing.

Fatemeh Rezaei

How many years did you stay in Chicago?

John Chapin

I was in Chicago for three years. I taught at DePaul University, I was teaching business writing, which I knew absolutely nothing about and winged it for two years. And then I moved to Baltimore after two years of teaching. So, when I landed in Baltimore, I arrived without a job. I had applied for a job at a university I had never heard of, and didn't get a job. So, I applied as an adjunct at a handful of schools I was fortunate to be teaching at, but I had five years of teaching experience at this point between graduate school and Chicago.

I got a lecturer position at University of Maryland College Park, in their Professional Writing Program. And I was teaching Technical Writing to engineers and freshman Composition at UMBC. And I also was teaching freshman Composition at what was called Villa Julie College at the time, but now it's Stevenson University. And they were they were just starting to grow, they're quite big now, but I taught the very first classes in the new buildings that they built in Owings Mills. I was trudging around in the mud on a construction site, going to teach class in the morning. That was exhausting. I was I only did that for one semester, but I was teaching 11 courses in a semester. I was a single dad by that point, so I needed cash, and I was teaching a lot and I thought, "I can't keep doing this. I'm going to have to find something else."

Fatemeh Rezaei

So, how did you learn about the job possibility at UBalt? And what, if anything, did you know about the University of Baltimore before you came to for the interview?

John Chapin

So, after my first semester teaching at UMBC and College Park and Stevenson, I realized that I was going to burn out by the time I was 35. So, I applied for a job as the Assistant Director of the writing program at UMUC at the time, UMGC now, and I got that job. I started that in January after the fall of teaching at those three schools. And I was able to stop being an adjunct and being both a teacher and an administrator at UMUC. That was not such a great fit, it was not a very happy place. But it was unbelievable experience in learning online education. I was supervising 93 instructors teaching 128 sections of writing. It's huge. So, that was really trial by fire, but it is not where I wanted to be.

So, at the end of that spring, I saw a job posting for the Writing Services Coordinator position at the University of Baltimore. I had applied for the position of the Director of the Writing Program at the University of Baltimore a year earlier. I'd never heard of it before, despite having grown up in Annapolis.

So, I was living in Hampden, in Baltimore, driving all over the state, driving to DC to go to work at UMUC. And I thought, boy, UB is right down the street. And I got that job as the writing services coordinator, which was running the Writing Center, running the Developmental Writing Program, and also running all of the writing placement testing.

Fatemeh Rezaei

What year did you join?

John Chapin

So, this was in August of 2007. I arrived right before the first freshman class in 30 years. So, my position had been a half time position, and with the freshmen coming in, they made it a full time position and I was the first full time Writing Services Coordinator. It was, at the time, called the Academic Resource Center, where I worked. And we had the smallest office I've ever worked in, a less than, I think it was 79 square feet.

Fatemeh Rezaei

In which building?

John Chapin

We were in the academic center, in a cinderblock walls office, right on the east side of the building, no windows, when I started, but the Academic Resource Center had been around for a couple of decades. I had a really interesting job working with our standard students who are, you know, I was working with students who weren't quite ready to take upper division writing at the University of Baltimore, for their major. WRIT 200 was the course.

And the idea was that it was for students who had taken WRIT 101 years earlier and had forgotten or there were a lot of international students, speakers of English as a second language, there were students who struggle with learning, there were students who just had been out of school for so long that they needed some help getting back into it. So, there was a placement test to determine if you went into the developmental writing course, or the WRIT 300, the required upper-level course. And I ran that placement test and the course that prepared students to really be able to write in their major at the upper division college level.

Fatemeh Rezaei

So, when you joined UBalt, your program was, as you mentioned, not part of the library. Could you tell us how you ended up joining the library and how you felt about it?

John Chapin

Sure. So, I have moved quite a bit in my time at the University of Baltimore. Although, those first six or seven years, I had that one position as the director of writing services. Again, running the Writing Center, which I had done in graduate school, running, basically freshman Comp, which I'd done in graduate school and writing placement. That was part of Student Affairs at the time. The Academic Resource Center, a couple of years later, was renamed the Achievement and Learning Center, because we weren't supposed to have "Academic" in our name if we were in student affairs. And after

six years or so, I wanted to be doing something different and the writing program was reinventing itself and was looking for an Assistant Director of Writing and a Director of Writing. The Director of Writing position is what I had originally applied for in 2006, when I was in Chicago, back when I had never heard of UB. And now, having worked there for seven years, I applied for the assistant director position and got it.

So, I became faculty at that time in the College of Arts and Sciences. Again, running the writing program. When that happened, I brought from the from student affairs, I brought with me WRIT 200 and the writing placement tests so that all of the undergraduate writing sequence, and the placement we're all finally in one single location, which made a lot of sense inside of the College of Arts and Sciences dean's office. And I was there for three years. My former boss in the Achievement and Learning Center retired in 2016. And, you know, her old position as the director of all the services that I'd worked under, became open. With her retirement was a move from the Achievement and Learning Center into the library, to have the services, tutoring, math, coaching, all of the writing, all of those services, computer skills workshops, to have that be a part of the library.

So, rather than having it in Student Affairs, which wasn't always such a great fit, Student Affairs has a really nonacademic focus intentionally, they're very much about student life, and life outside of class. And when you're in the tutoring world, you're very much a part of their class. Very much like the library is actually embedded deeply in the instruction, in the academic enterprise, but not part of the colleges, not really part of any one course, INFO 110 off to the side. You know, partnering with faculty to help students do their best and really teaching essential skills to students. So, the Achievement and Learning Center kind of became a part of the library in 2016. And actually, my first day on that job was the day after the Clinton-Trump election, November 9th, I think, that was a bizarre day to start a new job. But I had moved from staff to faculty and back to staff. I had moved from student affairs to College of Arts and Sciences, and now I was in the library. So, it gave me an opportunity to really have a have a bigger picture view of what the university does, and how universities work than if I had stayed in one place the whole time. You know, if I had gone straight from the Writing Center to the head of the Achievement and Learning Center, I wouldn't really have as good a sense of what happens in the colleges.

Fatemeh Rezaei

So, when you joined the library, it was actually Langsdale Library and then you work at RLB Library now. After the renovation of the library, what changes did you observe beyond the name?

John Chapin

So, here I am with my Zoom backdrop, being the second floor of RLB library, you can see right there, you can't see my finger pointing, but right there. That's the Writing Center. And moving from Langsdale and RLB, in terms of services and people, wasn't much of a change at all. You know, there was a change, obviously in leadership, when Lucy Holman left, and Jeffrey Hutson immediately took on the role of dean of the library. But writing centers are historically in broom closets at universities. They are on the bottom rung. It's very important. Students need it. We see a third of the students at the University every year. I mean, it's a lot of traffic. But getting out of that broom closet mentality to this and having all of that light and space and being near study spaces for students. It was absolutely a

game changer in terms of how we could work with students that we had. We weren't pushed, you know, I mentioned before my 79 square foot office. I go from that to this big office next to this glass atrium, where I can see the whole second floor, which is where Academic Success, the new name, is located.

There are spaces for the Writing Center, the tutoring lounge and the math center. We've all reconfigured those over the years, but in and amongst study spaces for students. So, the simple dedication of a learning space that a library is, is amazing for the work that I do and the work inside the library. You know, I moved into the library in 2016. In the fall of 2023, I began reporting to the provost office, instead of reporting to the dean of the library, but we're still located in this space.

Fatemeh Rezaei

Could you also tell us what is your role now?

John Chapin

Just one sec, I'll get to that. The difference in having all of these learning spaces, as opposed to being shoved off to the side in, not as an afterthought, you know, student affairs was a good home, the College of Arts and Sciences is a good home, Langsdale Library actually had some phenomenal spaces when it was in the Learning Commons. But this was just, this was an entirely different approach. And being in a space that students wanted to come to for the space made our physical location a draw.

And that had always been a little bit of a detriment before. And I love to show my colleagues pictures of my space, because very few people have the kinds of space that we have. So, my current title is probably where I should have started, you know, a half an hour ago, but my current title is the Director of Academic and Faculty support. Academic Support is what you call what the former Achievement and Learning Center was, we now are named Academic Success.

Being a part of the library, we aren't really a center. But in February of 2020, the university was doing some reorganizing, and they wanted to move CELTT, which is the Bank of America Center for Excellence in learning, teaching and technology. They wanted to move it out of the Provost Office and into the library. And it was a good fit with my skills and my background, having done faculty development, and online learning. And I had also successfully transitioned a staff into the library four years earlier with the Achievement and Learning Center. So, I took on that additional role as the executive director of CELTT. And that's really the faculty support piece. So, with academic success, I focus on supporting students and student success.

And with CELTT, there's a dual focus of faculty development, faculty, professional development, and really focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning. And it's also the home of the university's online learning. So, then, you know, this was February of 2020. And so timing wise, that meant that within a month of me taking that role, suddenly, all of Online Learning at the University of Baltimore in the middle of this pandemic was reporting to me. And so, while everyone else was learning to make sourdough bread and raising their new puppies at the beginning of the pandemic, we were all drinking from the firehose and trying to figure out how to make the university work in this new reality. And, you know, online learning had been at UB, luckily.

And it wasn't new to the school, but that, you know, not everyone was teaching online, certainly not the law school, certainly not our traditionalist faculty. So, that was a really challenging, and some people use that word in a negative way. I like a challenge. It was a really challenging couple of years. And it was really fun to figure out how to make it work.

You know, again, teaching faculty who've never taught online that it wasn't, this is not a sign of the end times, you know, the pandemic may have been end times, but this wasn't the end of teaching, this could be a good thing. We had been trying, since about 2011, to figure out how to run the Math Center online, you know, how do you manage equations and things like that in a in a text based online environment? This is pre zoom, how do you how do you do that we couldn't figure out how to tutor online, other than with somebody kind of using early forms of zoom, as a lecture, device lecturing at people, there wasn't a lot of ability to go back and forth.

Fast forward to the fall of 2020. We developed a really great model that we're still using now for how to be an online math center. And that was entirely forced by the pandemic. And it was a really great outcome. We've been doing some online work in other areas; writing lends itself well to online because its text based. But you know, the same time that CELTT was having to address the university's needs online, we had to completely redevelop the way we are offering students support

Fatemeh Rezaei

Are you still teaching?

John Chapin

I'm not. I was teaching, both at UMUC as an adjunct, and at UB as part of my course requirements part of my job until the fall of 2016. And I just had too much to do, as taking on this new, larger role as the director of the Achievement and Learning Center, I really thought I would miss teaching and I was surprised to discover that I don't. I get to work pretty closely with the tutors. And instead of having students in a class, I have tutors and our tutors are pretty spectacular. You know, they're not there, because they have to be.

I probably don't have to tell you that most students in a freshman composition class could easily rattle off a dozen places they would rather be, but the tutors are there because they want to be, and they love the work they're doing and they're so excited about it and they're good at it. So, we get to work with these really engaged, very competent students who are excited about the work that we do. And that really scratched the teaching itch in a way that has surprised me. And yeah, teaching takes up such a priority part of my brain when I teach, like, I can't disappoint my students, all 96 of them and their 10-page papers, I have to focus on them. And it was really nice to have that bandwidth open up for other kinds of work.

Fatemeh Rezaei

So, you have served on many university committees. As a result, you have seen a lot of changes that you both what are your observations about those changes at the University of Baltimore?

John Chapin

That's an interesting question. We are at such a different school than we were in 2007 when I joined, and in so many different ways. I mean, we are so much smaller, you know, and that is a bad thing because of enrollment decline. We are so much more, I think, properly focused right now, on adult education. When I started in 2007, the freshmen were coming in, and UB saw itself as you know, this is the introduction of "we're going to become a regular university." And that didn't really happen because as a commuter school, you are having a different kind of freshmen who aren't having a traditional experience. So, the university has changed a lot.

At the same time, you know that one of the first committees I was on, was looking at when to force students to take the writing placement test, should we force them to take it before they enrolled the first semester so that they can take that writing class that they need to take their first semester here to get them off to a good start? No, that's too soon. So, we had this committee meeting about when we should require students to take the placement. We couldn't require students to enroll in a course. But we could require them to take the course.

This is back when there was only one College of Liberal Arts, the College of Public Affairs and the College of Arts and Sciences, came out of a split three or four years after this. But at that meeting, we had conversations about, we don't want to create anything that we really want students to do well, but we also we, we can't create policies that are barriers to enrollment. We are not an elite institution that is looking to exclude, and to tell students exactly what they have to do.

We are going to give them the leeway to do what they need to do at the pace at which they need to do it. That hasn't changed at all. You know, we are still working with those same students, and they have mostly the same amount of freedom. We're still completely unwilling to do anything that is going to exclude students from enrolling, because we want those enrollments. I have found it interesting, you know, this summer is 17 years, how many times the same conversations play out in committee meetings, in student affairs, in the College of Arts and Sciences, in the library.

Now, in the Provost Office. Both of my units, you know, coming up on a year ago are back in the Provost Office, it's the same conversations. And you know, this, when I started, we were just coming off of accreditation, and I was a part of the 2017 accreditation, and I'm now co-chair of the current reaccreditation efforts. And it's bizarre to me to be part of something where those long cycles play out. I feel like I'm, I'm that old guy that saw Haley's comet when he was eight. And, you know, here it is, again, 20 years later. Before I started at UB, I'd never had a job longer than two years. Because I was moving around the country and around the world and teaching in different places. And it was not until I was, you know, fall of 2007 that I was in a place longer than that.

Fatemeh Rezaei

Interesting. How about your colleagues? Do you have any specific memories have any colleagues, any students any anything interesting that you can share with us?

John Chapin

I was teaching here in a variety of different courses from 2007 to 2016. And in addition to teaching the courses on load, I was also teaching as an adjunct, sometimes. I have such good memories of my time as an instructor. You know, it's funny, I can tell you about the students that came back and told me how much they learned, which is really gratifying. But I remember the things that I've learned from my students almost more than anything else, of learning, working with adult students who they do not present as good students, right?

They have all of these skills, but they probably weren't the straight A student in high school and college. I was not a straight A student college, but I was in high school. Hard working, I was into it, that that isn't the student that we tend to see at 29, who reenrolls here, they've got all of this experience and learning from them how much extent experience translates into an ability to do really strong work. You know, when I was teaching freshman Comp in Richmond, for the first time, I didn't have any adult students.

They were all 17 or 18, or the 19 ones were old. Right? And I was 26 and they thought I was a grandfather. They didn't have much life experience and the stories they would choose to write about their own lives when I asked them to were kind of imagined moments of drama. "When my grandmother died," you know, "the car accident," "the big game that I won at the last minute." Those were the stories they were telling and flash forward to the University of Baltimore, these adult students with families and years of work experience, have really complex, powerful stories to tell, usually much less privileged students as well. So, these are stories of overcoming adversity. And, you know, it was hard for my students in Richmond to be an adult that has a lot of adversity to go through, but they weren't generally dealing with the kind of life stories that a lot of our students are. I really liked that. It's made teaching the same thing year after year not repetitive at all.

Colleagues, yes. I mean, I feel fortunate that I have some colleagues that, you know, there's, I still have a good friend who was on my search committee, and, you know, she's still working at the university. Watching my cohort, I was in my late 30s, when I started, watching my cohort of young professionals start here, and then you know, now they're VPs. Now, many of us are kind of running things, after years of working our way through, becoming, you know, good institutionalists.

That's been really interesting. And it makes the University a very different place, when I have those connections broadly across the university, not just from having been in Provost's office, the college of Student Affairs, but from knowing people across the university for so many years. I was part of the Administrative Council back in 2007. We shared governance, there was the University Council, there are all these different forms that, you know, flash forward to 2024 and there's University of Baltimore Staff Senate and Faculty Senate. And, you know, I was a part of those kinds of groups, it's been really fascinating to learn about the whole school through those roles as well.

Fatemeh Rezaei

So, I asked all of the questions that I wanted to ask, is there anything else you would like to share about the University of Baltimore?

John Chapin

Um no, there's isn't anything in particular. I feel like we're at a really interesting moment where we kind of don't have a sense of who we are as an institution. When we look at our online presence and our in-person presence, we've got, you know, here's this beautiful building behind me. And we want it filled up. And right now, we are still, you know, we're still working in a different mode. I feel like there's a lot of opportunity for us to move forward in a different direction that we probably can't even see. I like change. I'm not one of those people that you know, you don't need to change manage me, I'm, I'm ready to go by the time it comes up. So, I'm kind of looking forward to where we're headed, because I don't you know, I get complacent if I've done in the same place for too long.

Fatemeh Rezaei

Thank you so much, John, for giving us your time.

John Chapin

Sure. My pleasure.