Marie Elizabeth Oliver
Welcome to La Louisiane, conversations brought to you by the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. I'm managing editor Marie Elizabeth Oliver. Our guest today is Dr. Ani Kokobobo, dean of the UL Lafayette College of Liberal Arts. She joined the University at the beginning of this academic year after serving as a professor and chair of the department of Slavic German and Eurasian Studies at the University of Kansas. Welcome, Dean Kokobobo.

Ani Kokobobo
Thank you so much for having me. It's good to be here.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
So, how has your move been from the University of Kansas to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette?

Ani Kokobobo
Well, moving is really hard. Make no mistake about it, but it's been really wonderful and exciting. Everyone's been incredibly welcoming, both in the college community, but also in the University at large. The University is growing, and so I feel like I've come at a really wonderful moment where we're advancing, we're retaining R1 and we're growing in all kinds of ways. I've really enjoyed getting to know my community in the college, a lot of faculty across the different departments. I work very closely with the department heads. I have a wonderful staff in my college. We just hired a new assistant dean. We had a long-standing assistant dean, and they do incredible work for our students. So, it's been really fun. Universities, believe it or not, are very similar, but also very different from each other. So that part has required some learning, and this was also my first dean position, so it's been really interesting to transition from a full-time faculty role. I was department chair, and I had administrative responsibilities, but I was very much in the classroom all the time, and now I'm not in the classroom, and so that's been a bit of a transition. And I keep thinking in the back of my head at some point, maybe I want to get back into the classroom because I miss being with the students and feeling that energy of higher ed.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
I know you still have some interaction with the students. You do some student events, and so that's that's good, that you're getting that kind of one-on-one interaction. Well, good. So, the College of Liberal Arts is our oldest college here at the University. They celebrated their centennial, I believe in 2021, and as you mentioned, we are growing. The college is growing. So why do you think a liberal arts education is still so valuable for students entering college today?

Ani Kokobobo
So that's a really good question, and I think a really important one. I'll start by saying that I'm a liberal arts graduate myself.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
As am I.

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Ani Kokobobo
So, the way that I think about this, and I've talked about this issue so many times in different ways, but if you wake me up in the middle of the night, what I would say is, in the liberal arts, we train the person. We're not here to give you a specific technical education. We are here to give you a set of critical skills that you can take with you to pretty much any career, any opportunity, any challenge, any problem that you face. Right? We face questions all the time, things we don't know about. How do we approach something we don't know about? What are some of the skills? How are we going to go about solving a problem? And in the liberal arts, we actually provide all those skills. We train the person and the nice thing about the kind of flexibility that we have is that, you know, any one of us could do any number of things, so we're not doing right now. The reason we're doing what we're doing in an ideal situation is because we're really, really excellent in that. I was a Russian literature professor. I had initially gone to college thinking I would become a lawyer, so initially I started to major in political science. That didn't work for me. It's like, "Oh, that's what this is. I don't want to do it." No offense to my political science department. And then I went to history, and that was interesting, but it wasn't quite it. Eventually I landed as a classical studies and Russian major, right? I mean, these were very — but these were smaller classrooms, and that really helped my learning. I was really passionate about that and developed the skills in this context that I was really passionate about. So that flexibility is, I think, really important, but also in this day and age, students will change multiple jobs in the course of their careers. And so having those skills, being nimble, having those soft skills that communication, the ability to understand different culture and to be willing to change contexts. And I think these are all really important skills that everyone needs. And you can go and do something else that requires more technical training, and you can gather the technical training. I mean, with AI right now at our fingertips, we need the ability. We need to know how to know. We need to learn how to learn, and that's what we do. I'll go to AI and put in any kind of command; it will spit out any kind of narrative for me. But what I know, is what this means, right? How much more context does this need? What do I need to do to give this piece of writing, a voice, right? And those are the skills that that we provide. And I think it's something that can be paired with pretty much anything.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
And it feels like, especially right now, things are changing so quickly. And I'm sure as someone coming into college or someone trying to determine their major, it can feel kind of intimidating to pick one thing. So, I think what you're saying about just having the flexibility, having those soft skills is so powerful.

Ani Kokobobo
And I think we'll have to learn how to learn differently now, with the advent of AI like, how will our education change? I mean, I don't have the answer, but I'm raising the question.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
So, what do you see as the driving force in the college's next chapter? You mentioned, you know, AI, you mentioned growth. Where do you see when you look 5, 10 years ahead at the College of Liberal Arts?

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Ani Kokobobo
That is a really interesting question, you know, and I try not to, whenever you come into your new administrative job, everyone will always say, "Well, what's your vision?" It's like, first of all, you really don't want a leader who's going to come in. "This is my vision, and this is what we're doing," right? I'm here. I've been really meeting members of my college trying to understand what they're about, trying to understand how we can co-create something together. So, I want to say that, but in terms of the future, I mean, I think now with the University, you know, being at an R1 right, that's a different set of standards and different benchmarks. And this is really important for the liberal arts too, because what does this mean? It means more doctoral education, right? We have really strong doctoral programs in the college. We have really strong master's program. We have really popular, by the way, to go back to the liberal arts conversation earlier, we were actually growing. Right now, we had a 7% growth just a semester. So, the interest is there in terms of student demand. So, we have new Ph.D. programs that we're developing. We're going toward more interdisciplinary programs, and that, I think is part of our future, to think across disciplinary, interdisciplinary lines. Thinking about, "How can we use different ways of thinking about things, different lenses to solve complex problems and also thinking about ways that we can partner with our colleagues across the University who are also doing really interesting work?" So, that's a big part of it. In my mind, I also think for us, especially in the humanities, I'm a humanist, our connection to our communities is also really important, and finding ways to explain for our communities the value of higher education. For me, that's something that I've been really passionate about, because what I do, I'm a 19th century Russian literature scholar, is very, very specific, right? But it's less specific if I frame it as — a lot of what Russian literature is about is the meaning of life. You know, what makes you tick in the morning, what motivates you, what makes you excited? And I've actually really enjoyed being able to talk to broader audiences about something very specific by framing it in a way that is more relatable to others. So a scoop is that we are hoping to also create a podcast in a couple months that's going to be called COLA-B, and we hope to broadcast it, maybe through KRVS, but I don't think we finalize those plans yet, but we're hoping to make our scholarship more visible, that way, more relatable, because I think it really it helps people understand their day-to-day lives, and it enriches how they think about things. Bringing that scholarly perspective, particularly in the same age where there's so much concern with information sources and disinformation, I think it's important to bridge those town-gown divides, the university-community divides, and bring this expert knowledge to help our communities. I think better approach different questions that they're facing.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
Wow. Well, we're excited and looking forward to hearing more about that. If you're just joining us. This is Marie Elizabeth Oliver, managing editor for La Louisiane, and I'm here with Ani Kokobobo, Dean of the UL Lafayette College of Liberal Arts. So, you talked about community and community involvement. I know part of the college that you oversee are these centers, the Center for Louisiana Studies, the Guilbeau Center. What roles do these centers play within the college and the greater community?

Ani Kokobobo
So, we're really excited about the centers. We have three centers that you mentioned, and I think what they do is they really crystallized kind of the broader work that we do in the college. Almost all of our departments engage with the community in some way and bring that academic scholarship into a

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broader public sphere. These centers do that more intentionally, and that is a more foundational part of their mission. So, you know, at the Center for Louisiana Studies, they do ongoing events and programming about Louisiana, and it's always an interdisciplinary lens. They have incredible books that they also have the University of Louisiana Press as part of the center so, and they often publish titles that are related to Louisiana, and they have ongoing sales, so you should check them out if you have a moment. But the Gaines Center, similarly, you know, Dr. Gaines, so much of his creativity was inspired by Louisiana and so, you know, the Gaines Center also hosts ongoing programming through public intellectuals and different scholars who come in and share some of their work with our University community, but also the broader Lafayette community. The Guilbeau Center also does really important work — one of the things that I think unites all these centers is that they seek to archive the experiences of the surrounding community. It won't always be the same population, or it'll be Dr. Gaines' papers, or it'll be, you know, somebody that's kind of closely aligned with him, but they all bring different pieces of the regional, communal experience, and I think illuminate that in really interesting ways.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
Well, that's so powerful too, because I think, as you were talking about just making things accessible, things that may seem very specific, accessible, one thing we, who all live here, can relate to is the culture and the history of our community. So, I know that's a real connection point that means a lot to a lot of people. So, you talked a little bit about this. But as the college is constantly evolving and changing to adapt to the to the current moment, are there any new concentrations or degree programs that maybe people may not know about yet, or ones that have come up within the last few years, that you wanted to talk about?

Ani Kokobobo
We are always thinking about ways to grow programs. Right now, we have a social and public policy Ph.D. program that has received really positive reviews and is with the Regents. We're hoping it will get approved sometime this summer. So that's one particular milestone, and that's really important to us. It's really interdisciplinary, brings together different departments in our college and doctoral education, I think, has been an important part of the growth of the University, so we're really excited to be able to contribute more to that. We have multiple Ph.D. programs in English and in communicative disorders and also in Francophone studies. And another piece also is trying to grow undergraduate education, trying to provide more tailored pathways for students. We have a new concentration. We had a new concentration in social work that we developed in sociology, and that's been really popular for students. We're going to put the sociology degree online entirely, hopefully beginning next year, because that too provides more flexibility. And we also know that sometimes students will come, and they'll start their degree programs, and they drop out, and they'll start a job, and it's harder for them to come back. And so, we're hopeful that with an online degree like that, we can catch more students and help them complete their degrees, because that's what they came here for. And we have an online degree also that we've developed in criminal justice that's also been really popular. So, I believe that department is looking to develop more concentrations. So, we're always thinking and growing. The Modern Languages Department is developing a more interdisciplinary culture focus concentration. I don't think they've decided on the name. I will not announce the name, but, but they're thinking about ways to make that modern languages degree a little bit more interdisciplinary, so that you can add your passion

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for culture with a study of language as well. And, oh, the other thing, and this is really in the works, is a minor in AI studies. And this is really interdisciplinary, and we're excited to partner with colleagues across the University on this, because I think this goes back to what I was saying before about the liberal arts. I think adding that liberal arts awareness to AI, working with AI is really important so that you can think about the ethics of working with AI, right, and potential bias or misconceptions that AI has, in addition to just outright wrong information. That sometimes it's like, this is only 93% accurate. It's a new technology, and I think we can add a lot of nuance and thoughtfulness to it with a liberal arts orientation, but also bringing in the different pieces of it, like coding and other pieces, because...

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
So much of it is technical. But as you mentioned, you have to kind of understand the human.

Ani Kokobobo
Yeah, and reading critically. I mean, so much of it is to read critically, right? And it's like, okay, you produce this initial draft, but how can I fix it? Right? I mean, it's a tool, but I think our liberal arts awareness can really help make the most of it.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
Wow, that's interesting. So, you mentioned this a couple of times, how the University recently announced the renewal of its R1 status, and I know research is a lot of what the college does. Are there any things that kind of stand out to you or that you're most excited about that's coming out of the college and faculty in terms of research?

Ani Kokobobo
I mean, I feel so fortunate to have it's just an incredible group of faculty. They're really, really passionate. They're always having new ideas and pushing to the next level. So, I'm and it's been just such a treat to be able to be part of that community and engage with them. So, every Friday, I actually host Donuts with the Dean. And I won't get a ton of people, but I'll get a good number of faculty, so I've been able to get to know them. In addition to my department visits, I have this smaller, more casual ability to get to know them and hear about their passions and their incredible researchers are really passionate about research. And I just found out, just the last couple weeks, actually, and this has been something that I've been passionate about too coming in. But you know, ultimately, as the faculty that have to do this work, but I found out that we have grown our grant activity by, I think, something like 130%. I feel really proud, and that's all the work of our faculty going out there and applying for more grants. You don't always need a grant to do humanities research, but again, it's a way to broaden the impact make connections, or the social sciences for that matter. But I think it's a way to really broaden our impact, and our faculty and the humanities and social sciences keep doing that, because we are part of that, R1 story of the University

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
Absolutely. Well, that's exciting. We'll look forward to hearing more coming out of these grants and the podcast and all the new concentrations. It's really exciting. We appreciate you joining us today. Thank you so much!

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Ani Kokobobo
It's been great to talk to you.

Marie Elizabeth Oliver
And we appreciate you joining this conversation with La Louisiane, the official magazine of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette since 1989. Check back next month for more discussions with members of our University community. You can listen to an archive of this interview by visiting louisiana.edu/magazine. KRVS is listener supported public radio for Acadiana, a service of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Thanks for listening.

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