Katherine Beckett Named New LSJ Chair

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By Emma York, LSJ Communications Student Assistant

Succeeding Professor Steve Herbert who has chaired the department for the last nine years, Professor Katherine Beckett is excited to continue the strong direction of Law, Societies, and Justice in her own way.

Beckett, a joint professor in LSJ and Sociology, has been a faculty member since 2000. She received her PhD in Sociology from UCLA where she wrote her dissertation on the Wars on Crime and Drugs. She has since continued to produce remarkable research on the topics of mass incarceration and racial inequities in the criminal justice system.

The recipient of UW's Public Service Award in 2013, Beckett recently provided important background research that led the Washington Supreme Court to rule the death penalty unconstitutional.

Relating her understanding back of LSJ to the initial vision of Michael McCann, Beckett perceives the core values of LSJ as those familiar to students and faculty – one of academic rigor, social justice, and community.

“I see it as a commitment to social justice paired with a deep commitment to intellectual rigor, not in a dogmatic way, but having an inquiring mind about what is justice in the first place,” said Beckett. “We are about social justice, but always asking ourselves what does that mean and how can you legitimate certain understandings of it.

Her predecessor devoted his efforts to creating unique learning opportunities for majors, engaging the alumni community, and maintaining a commitment to social justice.

“One of my biggest goals was actually the alumni relations piece, because I knew that there was a lot of goodwill in our alumni group,” reflected Herbert. “Very many of our alums had very positive experiences, and I was confident would want to stay connected to the department. I am pleased beyond measure that that has proven to be true.”

“Steve has done a fantastic job with alumni outreach,” Beckett said. “We were so new and so young there really wasn't an alumni network to outreach with in the beginning, and over time it has been easier. He has put a lot of thought and time into finding and connecting with alumni.”
In addition to bolstering the LSJ community, the number of experiential learning opportunities offered to undergraduates has grown significantly in the last nine years. LSJ is fortunate to now have three endowed funds – Stromberg, Wettack, and Garcia – that support study abroad, prison-based education, and internship experiences, respectively. Other ways for both students and alumni to engage include the Annual Day of Service, the Learning from Failure seminar, and quarterly career panels.

“I plan to continue to nurture the program and continue to offer experiential learning opportunities to our students, to keep connecting our students with alums and great internships,” said Beckett. “I want to sustain a lot of what he has created.”

Beckett also plans to work with a Diversity Committee to ensure that LSJ classrooms are as inclusive and welcoming as possible, and to continue to find ways to involve students in research.

Given the profound growth and interest in LSJ, recent developments have worked to attract undergraduates and to unite a community around the core values of the department.

“It wasn't necessarily my goal that we would grow, but I am pleased that we have been able to increase the campus profile of LSJ,” said Herbert. “We continue to grow at the level of student interest in the major, it is an increasingly diverse group of students, and I think we have created a strong campus wide reputation for creative teaching, innovative scholarship, and demonstrated public service.”

Reflecting on his last nine years leading the department, Professor Herbert is encouraged by the growth he has seen and is honored to have played a role in shaping the current state of the department.

“It has been really gratifying to see the amount of goodwill in this community and it has been really satisfying to feel like I have played some part in bringing that community together around meaningful work,” he said. “Seeing that both current students and alums share a passion for public service and a commitment to justice is rewarding.”

In light of the announcement of the new LSJ Chair, Herbert is pleased with the selection of his successor, and is certain that the values of the program will only be improved upon under the direction of Professor Beckett.

“She has made very clear with her teaching and her scholarship that she has a very strong commitment to public service,” he said. “Her passion for helping students prepare themselves for meaningful futures is very strong. I think that, under her leadership, that component of our community will be strengthened.”