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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
**MORRIS**

## Janet Schrunk Ericksen: An Unplanned Champion of Liberal Arts

(October 31, 2023) If things had gone according to plan when she started college, Janet Schrunk Ericksen would be a doctor in Kansas today, rather than the chancellor at a small, public liberal arts college.

Ericksen was a biology major at the University of Kansas with plans to go to medical school.

“I was in an honors biology seminar my first year; I took physiology, anatomy, two semesters of chemistry, and calculus.”

But she remembers better an English literature survey class that included Old English.

“It was the first time I had heard Old English. I thought, oh this is cool! Then I took an art history class and couldn’t believe that I could sit while people showed me cool slides of beautiful stuff and told me what was significant about it. All I had to do was learn about it and then analyze it. I can do this. This is great!”

Ericksen’s path to her bachelor’s degree took a turn away from biology when she decided to study abroad during her senior year and was told that pathway wasn’t really open if she planned to go to med school. So, she changed majors and studied art history and English at University of Hull, Northumberland, United Kingdom. When she returned to Kansas, she had no idea what to do next.

“My friends were all taking the graduate school entrance exam, so I took it and thought, okay, I’ll go to grad school. I had no real clue what grad school was; I just knew it was more school. But I didn’t know how you became a professor. I didn’t really have aspirations to be ... a professor. I had no idea.”

She went on to earn a master of arts and doctorate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It was there she met her husband, David.

After earning her doctoral degree, Ericksen landed a teaching job in the English department at Vanderbilt University, a private research institution, a position she held for five years.



Ericksen was not entirely happy in her role at Vanderbilt, where she did not find junior faculty to be very well supported. In searching for a new job, her husband encouraged her to consider an opening at the University of Minnesota Morris. David had attended Carleton College in Northfield and was sure that Janet would thrive on a liberal arts campus.

“From the start, UMN Morris was different. Having people from the sciences who came to hear my job talk was different. And the students were amazing. I was teaching the same classes at Morris that I'd been teaching at Vanderbilt, to a markedly different student body. And the students just kept saying, ‘that's so cool.’”

In contrast to her first university position, Ericksen found that not only was she encouraged to participate in the governance of the campus, it was expected.

“At a place like Morris, every voice not only can be heard, but is needed right from the start. So I found myself taking on new responsibilities before I had even achieved tenure. I had no intention of pursuing administrative positions, and no desire to make that my goal.”

But she found being on a small campus allowed her access to interesting subjects and colleagues in all disciplines. This led to interdisciplinary opportunities like a course on environmental history in Iceland, co-taught with a colleague in biology.

“The campus is a genuine community of teachers and scholars interested in each other, and each other's work.”

Over the past 25 years at UMN Morris, Ericksen's work has included a variety of leadership roles. She served as director of the Honors Program, interim chair of the Division of the Social Sciences, chair of the Division of the Humanities, and Summer Session co-chair.

Ericksen has also been recognized for her teaching, receiving both the University of Minnesota Morris Alumni Association Teaching Award and Horace T. Morse-Minnesota Alumni Association Award. She is a member of the University of Minnesota Academy of Distinguished Teaching, and she tries to continue to get into the classroom, having most recently taught an Honors course in spring of 2023.

In 2017, she was named interim vice chancellor for academic affairs and dean. While in the interim role, Ericksen successfully authored two grants: a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence proposal to bring an early childhood education expert to Morris in collaboration with the West Central Initiative Fund, and an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Governors' grant. She worked collaboratively with others on campus to restructure several campus units to better coordinate student services. And she implemented new programming to support early career faculty.

It was just five months after being named to the vice chancellor role after a national search that Ericksen was once again in an interim position—that of acting chancellor. Then-chancellor Michelle Behr was retiring and Ericksen was named to fill a two-year interim position.

Stepping into the role of acting chancellor, Ericksen wasn't looking to make it a permanent title. Her goal as acting chancellor was to continue the momentum "on our mission to be a national leader in collaborative and innovative 21st century liberal arts education."

But when the chancellor search began, Ericksen worried that having someone unfamiliar with both the campus and the University of Minnesota might stall progress on the campus's strategic goals at a crucial time for the campus.

"We have the advantage, sometimes also the challenge, of strong connections to the University of Minnesota System."

Ericksen believes that her own research has enhanced her ability to lead.

"A study of how Latin texts were used in early medieval English schools is probably small, although I do think it useful in understanding how education changes, as well as how the role of reading has changed and continues to change. And my research makes super clear that I need to be open to multiple perspectives and to rely on the knowledge of others."



Reflecting on the 25 years she has spent at UMN Morris, Ericksen says one of the joys of the job has always been the students.

"I did not especially enjoy teaching graduate students [at Vanderbilt]. Grad students start their classes thinking they should know everything, even when it's the first class they've taken in Old English. I think that working at a school [like UMN Morris] that really helps students see their possibilities is more gratifying. I have so enjoyed the students I've taught at Morris. They care and grow in all sorts of amazing ways and are just genuinely open to learning."

Ericksen says both students and staff at Morris have had imagination and willingness to consider new ideas and actions, something that will be necessary as higher education faces an unprecedented array of challenges.

"My goals are to make sure this place and what it is trying to do can continue and be even better.

That includes making sure that we are accessible to the students who should be here."

Ericksen admits that one of the constant challenges UMN Morris faces is explaining the campus.

“Liberal arts colleges ... are only really understood from within, and not even always there. I have, however, definitely decided that a liberal arts college is a wonderful place to work, and I have also become a firm advocate of liberal arts college education. I not only embrace the college’s mission, but I also truly like promoting and supporting the fantastic work of UMN Morris.”