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Interview with Mike Alexandroff, 1998

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Mike Alexandroff

Mike Alexandroff has written a comprehensive history of Columbia College Chicago, which will be published in the year 2000.

OK... I'll get the date and your name, and then—take your time. Today is January the 19th, 1999, and this is an interview with Mike Alexandroff, past President of Columbia College Chicago in Chicago, Illinois.

So, if you could start by telling us the origins of the philosophy behind Columbia's policy of open admissions."

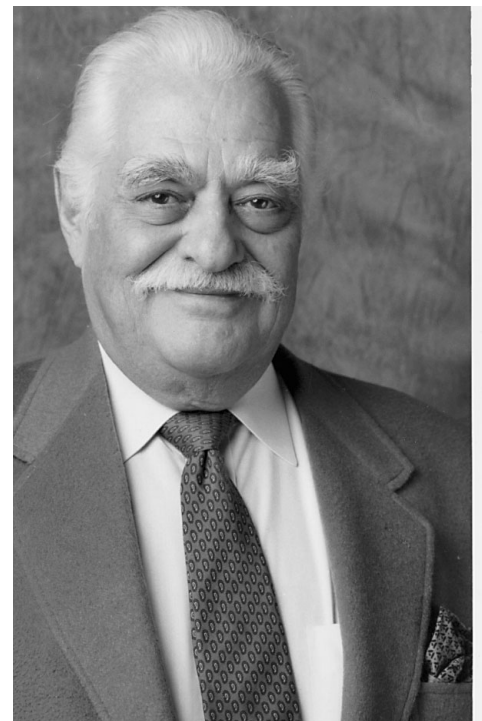
It would be entertaining, I suppose, to imagine that at some moment in the early 1960s, I had a transcendent vision of Columbia that somehow sprang full-blown. But... of course that isn't true. Nothing springs full-blown at any moment except to remarkable visionaries, which I certainly wasn't. But I did have some... sense of purpose, even though to have attempted to cause this to be some kind of formulaic system that I would momentarily apply would have no real basis in fact. I think the primary motive was... perhaps then, a question of just institutional survival. In 1964, when the College was seriously renewed, or an effort made to seriously renew it, we had something under 200 students, no resources, no reserves... and had I been sensible, we would have just folded it up and walked away. Literally, on January 2nd, 1964, we moved from Wabash and Adams Street, where we had shared facilities with the Pestalozzi Teachers College, who had ended what had been a 30-year association. And with the intercession of several old friends of the

family, and the enlistment of a wonderful man named Alfrerlman, who gave us space at Lake Shore Drive, a floor... I'm not quite sure what prompted his—what intelligence prompted that vision, but he did. And we moved this pitiable little institution to the building at 540 Lake Shore Drive. And as I said, the cardinal issue, the overriding issue, was simply could we survive.

As I said though, I did have some purpose in mind, but it was hardly defined, and the most important thing was to gather enough students and a handful of part-time teachers, somehow, to develop an institution. I don't think at that point I had anything in mind, particularly, about developing to what size or anything. That certainly came with the evolution of time. I suppose it could be fairly said that I had some early inspirations, which successfully enlisted the energies and talents of a number of others, who contributed to Columbia's ultimate prosperity, but at that time they contributed to the possibility that we might be alive the following September, and somehow be able to gather students. I suppose it could be said that Columbia's early life was informed by an evolution of what were largely unproven ideas of a college institution, but Columbia's idea was not a personal invention without tie to enlightened educational philosophy or practice. Nor was it simply a new implement that begged successful marketing. I'm trying to think of some kind of... bridge to an institution that had some promise and some operative vitality, though I think of a little at that time.

Everything was an off the top of the head invention, simply to recruit students. As that was successfully accomplished—though in minimal numbers, I think we had 300 students by 1966 or something in that neighborhood. If we had a budget, we certainly didn't call it one. The total expenditure of the institution might have been \$100,000 dollars by then. There were about 25 part-time faculty members, obviously we had no full-time faculty, and a focus which was largely on television and radio. What that meant was that we were operating as a kind of professional school, though, we weren't a trade school. Some general education was always offered, of extraordinarily good quality. Even when the enrollment doubled within a several year period, the students were almost entirely career oriented in terms of the... broadcasting industries.

There was at least some identifiable college effort about it, or college mission. We had a graduation in



1964, in June. And actually graduated 25 people. I remember we had the graduation at the Prudential Building auditorium, which was vastly too big for the crowd we had, and we set the chairs about six feet apart so as to give some impression that we were full. We had music, and a variety of normal accoutrements to college graduations. For the first time, in many, many years, we had an independent—and quite attractive—facility at Lake Shore Drive, and a heck of a lot of friends, I mean in the teachers and alumni from past times and so on, who apparently contributed to our being at least successful with this focus in radio and television. I suppose it might fairly be said that we practiced open admissions out of economic necessity. I'm sure I had some larger social perception, but at the same time, I don't think it was sensibly operative. It was not until we began to enjoy considerable growth, rather dramatically so, by the middle 1960s, by 1966, that at least I began to attach a social view and a social philosophy to the idea of open admissions.

So initially, it was a survival tactic, to try and bring in students.

Few were turned away. But the students were of quite good quality, nevertheless. The College had, after all, the momentum, at that time, of more than 70 years of episodic collegiate adventures, so there was some continuity to the institution. But... resources were so defeatingly strained that ambitions to be a serious college were unrealistic, at best.

When you said you could have almost just as easily have folded up shop—

Well, it probably would have been more sensible.

But why didn't you? Was is the students, or what made you decide to—

Well, I was about 40 years old, and in a state of some uncertainty about whether I would go, and obviously, I'd actually worked there since 1947, and my father before me; my wife died in 1962, and I had two young children. I wasn't paid regularly enough to—but debt financing was not unknown then either, so somehow I survived. But I did have some pretty valuable support from several people. I remarried in 1963, and Jane had worked at the College for six or seven years at that point, and it became almost a family enterprise. What else would we do? And I had a really excellent officially titled dean. We had Jane, myself, and Wolf Dochterman. That was the administrative staff, and a part-time bookkeeper and several and sundry people. But Wolf knew radio and television, film, anything in communication; I knew the educational effort. When we moved from Wabash it was about 15 below zero, and a terrible night. And Wolf saw that everything got on the trucks, and Jane stood on the loading platform at 540 and checked things in, and I was upstairs kind of telling the movers where to put it. We'd done a little remodeling, mostly because Bud Perlman advanced us \$40,000 to remodel before we took the space. While only seven or eight thousand feet, it was the top floor, and quite attractive. It certainly had everything we needed. In fact, the largest expense was to create a television studio, which was first rate. There was no question we had an exceptionally good facility, and we had always had that.

At the same time, it was the '60s; many young people, particularly, were re-examining the whole fabric of American life, the civil rights

movement in the South. There was something in the spirit of the times. I don't think Columbia could have happened at any other time in history. And... we damn sure weren't healthy. The wolf was always at the door, but on occasion, the wolf was diverted by... it must have run off into the woods somewhere, because—we at least had a door by that time, to keep him at bay. But it was a struggle of a little, inconsequential place. I, and several people about me, believed that higher education had been opened up by the GI Bill. But by the end of the '50s, the effect of that enormous influx of eight million veterans who took advantage of collegiate training—and even with the Korean War, the momentum of that had ceased, or had diminished, and education was still essentially elitist. It certainly continued to be acutely discriminatory towards minorities, both in terms of the constitution of faculty and certainly in the choice of students.

I think somewhere in the—maybe a year or two later, '64 or '65—I really began to have a sense of what kind of an institution was possible, and what kind of an institution I wanted to author. And I began increasingly to incorporate a whole number of things of the '60s. My general philosophies are not founded in the '60s. I think in a philosophical sense, I'd been a progressive my whole life. But by '66, I was beginning to have a kind of developed philosophy about the institution. And certainly a vigorous opposition to the elitist ideas that had governed higher education, more or less traditionally, with a lapse in the years of the GI bills. The themes by which we advertised ourselves were very

contemporary. I don't mean by any of this to suggest that I intended, quite to the contrary, a political place. We certainly were not. But we did embrace a number of the themes, not the least of which was that I wanted us to be an institution, that made no discriminatory exclusions, and I wanted the institution to be contemporarily relevant, though I would reject the perversions of this term of 'relevance' that were popular during the '60s.

But a great deal happened to Columbia in the period from '64 to '69. We were beginning to attract students in some rather rewarding numbers. I think the enrollment was probably five to six hundred by three years after we moved, and I hired the first full-time faculty member, who was Bill Russo, who was enjoying a very sterling career. He was certainly one of the most prominent American composers and American musicians, and he was in England, and somehow I persuaded him to come to Columbia. It probably worked out well, but he must have had some several years in which he was just astonished at his own choice. And as a natural consequence of the kinds of people we were attracting, particularly as faculty, who had a great many community roots, we had an astonishing civic engagement within five years, which of course had a reciprocal benefit to the recruitment of students. By 1968, I remember, we already had eight or nine or ten full-time faculty. And all of them simply remarkable. And we had an opportunity of a part-time faculty of extraordinary qualifications. Since I did all of the teaching recruitment, part-time and full-time, I spent a lot of time going about, just watching people do other things. And if I saw somebody who did something

prominently in some valuable social endeavor, I'd at least bring them in as a part-time teacher. I had Harry Bouras, who was certainly the most prominent cultural figure in Chicago. Harry had a radio program on WFMT, he was an art critic, an artist, the most comprehensively knowledgeable intellectual imaginable. A speaker of extraordinary quality, Harry was at Columbia from the middle '50s, but he flowered in the '60s. He taught one class or two classes in the '50s, and he was continuously at the College from '55. Harry, more than anybody, gave us cultural and intellectual legitimacy as an institution, and he advertised us wherever he went. And then Bob Edmonds, who had been the national executive secretary of the Screen Directors Guild. I had known him from the '50s when he was in Chicago. I persuaded him to come and to create a film department. And then Hoke Norris, in particular, who was the literary editor of the Sun-Times, and one of America's most prominent literary critics, also a novelist, Southern novelist, told me about seeing some kind of fiction writing workshop run out of a basement on the Near North Side one night a week. Bob Cromie, who was the literary editor for the Tribune, seconded Hoke's view, and I went out to see John Schultz.

And I thought him then, as I still feel, that Schultz was one of the most perfectly original teachers I had ever seen. What gave him his particular glory was that he had invented a system of teaching writing and English, which was a startling exhibit of educational ingenuity, and he brought Betty Shiflett a year later.

Thaine Lyman was really the father of television at Columbia. He came in 1948. He was one of the earliest technical people in television, though he had a far larger artistic background. He worked at WGN full-time. He vigorously supported Columbia's mission, despite the fact that he was a rather conservative person. And I'd say that Thaine's effort was, more than anybody, what gave the College health and dimension. There's just no question that without that core enrollment in television, we'd have never gone anywhere.

And Al Parker, who actually predated me at Columbia, taught several radio classes over many years, and became head of radio, despite the fact that he had a full-time job, I think by that time at ABC and Channel 7. The average college full-time faculty member has at best a 10-hour presence a week on an ordinary campus, maybe office hours twice a week or something. But these people worked 60 hours at Columbia.

And was there a sense that the people that you mentioned felt they were helping to create something?

Oh, I think we all felt we were. I'm trying to think of all the faculty, but... we were a family. In one way or another, however vague, I think the early people all had the feeling that they were... rowing an important boat across the Jordan. There was a great sense of purpose, even if the purpose hadn't been precisely defined, I think we all agreed with a kind of abstraction. I don't want to make it appear that I was singular in any way. I was singular, but I wasn't unsupported.

Why do you think—if I could get you to talk about yourself for just a little while—why you? Why were you doing this? Why were

you going out, and, you know, why was it important to you to find these people, to look for them, and to gather them together?

Well, I suppose I am by nature entrepreneurial, and [I had] a fairly organized philosophy of the way things ought to be. And weren't, of course.

You remind me of—I wrote my dissertation on the coach from the University of Chicago, [Amislan Bustet]. But his first boss, William Rainey Harper, did much what you did, but he had a big budget.

And he had the Rockefeller money. Robert Maynard Hutchins did it too, and I was very impressed with him, and I went to the U of C. And because of my family connection, I had a hell of a preparation to be what I was.

Speak to that a little more.

Well, my mother was very prominently regarded as a doyenne of progressive education. She had gone to Chicago Normal College, came from the old 11th Ward, had gone to New York and had taught at the great experimental schools when the old Dewey movement was in flower. She was a suffragette and... among those that chained themselves to the White House gate in the struggle for the women's right to vote. She was one of the truly serious educators I've ever seen.

I was wondering, what was her name before she married?

Oh, Cherrie Phillips. And my father was an extraordinary intellectual, boundless. Philosophy, music, literature, drama, theater particularly... a toolmaker, a master toolmaker... and a radical, I mean, politically radical. Undoctinaire as hell, but certainly...

Was he from Chicago as well?

No, he- I don't think he ever lived in Chicago until he moved here with my mother. He was born in Russia in 1886, and came to this country in 1903 or 1904, I think. And without describing it at any great length, the revolutionary ferment in Russia was profound, and my father lived in a shtetl in Kishnev, but it was an extraordinary intellectual family, and so he had the undoctinaire radicalism of a great many immigrants in this country. And had just the most varied intellectual history imaginable. When he was 21 years old he was a friend of Jack London's, and he founded, with William Dean Howells, foreign reading rooms. That was very important, since whatever existed in American libraries was not applicable, or not accessible to this great wave of European immigrants.

I've never heard of them.

There were hundreds in this country, and William Dean Howells was a most illustrious name in American literature.

His first name was Norman.

My father, yes. By 1910 or 11, which would have made him, what, 23 or 24, he was on the national lecture circuit, dealing with theater, and he lectured with—I'm trying to think of the name, I wrote it, but I can't—at the moment, I don't know his name. It would have been the man who had been the musical secretary to Grieg, and he spoke about music and my father spoke about theater. My father was a union organizer, and at the same time he had this extraordinary intellectual bent. He was the key toolmaker in the naval gun factory during World War I, and wrote a couple of pretty good plays. In about 1920 he invented a pleating machine, to make pleats. He

sold it successfully all over the country, except that pleats went out of fashion, and that ended that. Anyway, he got into real estate, and within a year or two, he was the manager of one of the biggest realty firms in the city. But in 1929 the Depression came and the bottom fell out of real estate. So he developed a radio program. He's really a genuine pioneer of radio broadcasting, and his program was on from about 1932 to 1934, every night for a while. It came on right after "Amos and Andy." It was called "Pages from Life." The name of the guy I couldn't think of who was Grieg's secretary was—I don't know his first name—Von Liebnicht. In my dotage, names just...

You're doing great (laughs).

"Pages from Life." Its main character was named Mr. Rubin, and Mr. Rubin had a company called the Hurry-Up Substitute Company. The theory being if you needed something in a hurry, you know, you called Rubin. So it was a kind of... in an elemental way, it was kind of a Jewish dialect show, but it wasn't, really, it was just an amalgam of all sorts of foreign characters. My father was a dialectician, the man of a thousand voices. In the first place, he spoke about 10 languages fluently. In the second place, if he heard a dialect, or Chinese, or... anything. Anything. Those are easy. He could somehow recreate a Swahili dialect if he heard it for a moment. So he played all the parts. And the show was not unpopular. But in 1934, Hitler came to power, and my father believed that this program might enlarge anti-Semitism. So he just quit, ended the program, walked away from it. And he started a kind of radio program development company, which

wasn't seriously successful. My father did have the idea of something called "The Rise of America," which became "Cavalcade of America," one of the staples of radio for years and years. DuPont sponsored it, and NBC or whoever stole it away. He had studios in the Fine Arts Building.

Oh.

And Pestalozzi Teachers College and Columbia were in the same building. Both institutions had virtually failed, but the president of Pestalozzi asked my father if he would develop and teach a couple of radio courses, which might attract students to Pestalozzi. Columbia had been bought in bankruptcy by Pestalozzi in 1928, and by 1934 had very little visible existence. My father developed a couple of radio courses for Pestalozzi. And, because he was interested in education, with my mother's prompting, in not more than a year, he really had all the reins of the Teacher's College in his hands. It was a remarkable transposition of careers. In a couple of years he built Pestalozzi into a thriving institution. He had a kind of left-handed interest in Columbia, because at that time, it was... I forgot, it was still "Columbia of Expression." Somehow he left the management of Pestalozzi, and in some kind of a deal, which I'm unclear about, he took over Columbia, which had 30 students. It was a stepchild of the Teacher's College. He gave it the name of Columbia College of Drama and Radio, proceeded to produce plays and a whole number of things that attracted an astonishing faculty. As he had done with Pestalozzi. Columbia used to perform at the old Chicago Jewish Board of Education. It was part of the Jewish Board of Education, but it was at

the 11th Street theater. Which, oddly, years later, we [purchased]. Columbia was gaining success. It was the success of 150 students, that was a living, you know, barely.

And was this still during the Depression?

Well, it was the end of the Depression. But the Depression didn't end until World War II.

Right, right.

And then the bottom fell out of everything, because all the young men had gone into the Army, so it became a kind of women's place. And my father had been instrumental—been influential, I should say—in the effort of developing the first GI Bill. General Bradley had just returned from Europe, where he had commanded American forces under Eisenhower, and he became the head of the Veteran's Administration. There was a chapter in the GI Bill that had to do with psychological guidance and vocational counseling and so on. Twelve universities in the country got guidance centers supported by the Veteran's Administration. Somehow my father got a guidance center for Columbia. And then the GI Bill came, and Columbia had six hundred students. Almost entirely in radio. Some theater, but a lot of radio. Columbia had become formally known as Columbia College in 1943, '44. The institution prospered. I came to work in '47, to work in the guidance center. My undergraduate major was psychology. I won't argue that I was either terribly competent or terribly interested. I'd been to college before the war in two or three places, and I don't think I seriously came out of the Army with a serious idea I was going to go back to college, but my father persuaded me to go back. Even during the heyday of the GI

Bill, when most of the students were in radio subjects, Columbia had first rate liberal education. First rate everything in the broadcasting industry, too. I can't imagine anyone in the country had a broadcasting faculty as we had, when everybody of any success taught at Columbia. We had television in 1948.

So that was added in '48?

Yes. And the real pioneers in television and the broadcasting industry in Chicago all taught at Columbia. I learned from my father how to recruit. The thing I did best, in my Columbia time, was recruit teachers. If you go over the 1973 self-study for accreditation, you'll find a chapter which Lou Silverstein certainly contributed to importantly, and it's just headed "The Teacher," which had the whole perception of what we were looking for in teachers. If I might say so, I think it's the most idealistic interpretation of the teaching profession, and it's still a valuable and comprehensive statement.

We were talking about the self-study, the chapter on "The Teacher," and you said you were the best at recruiting teachers.

I will award myself that badge. We had people that probably taught a full load of classes, but they taught it as part-time teachers. But then in '46 my mother had a stroke, and was seriously disabled. My father could spend less time at the College. Finally, in 1951, he moved to California, where he began Columbia College of Los Angeles. Over 10 years, it was more prosperous than Columbia here. He died in 1960. I got married in 1946, and in 1949, I and my then wife took a belated honeymoon in Mexico. I nosied around about what was going on there in television, and

radio. And when I came back, I told my father that radio and television would be common all over Latin America, and nobody was involved in training or educating anybody to be in the broadcasting industries all over Latin America, and certainly in Mexico, which had prosperous radio effort, and had developed a new television industry. It was then in its infancy, but extraordinarily well funded, because Azteca Films, which controlled everything in film in the Hispanic world, was headed by Don Emilio Escarga. He also owned everything in radio in Latin America. A foresightful fellow, he had built Televicentro, in Mexico City. It had four.

This is in '47?

No, this was in 1949.

Oh, OK.

My father went to Mexico City. I don't remember what the arrangements were, he wasn't there long. He came back and seconded my whole idea. He was an extraordinary entrepreneur. Over that next two years, he founded Columbia College Pan-Americano, in Mexico City. Which, with Don Emilio Escarga's help, it prospered initially.

Really?

Though he was totally preoccupied with my mother, he did manage to start a branch of Columbia in California and another one in Mexico, which sort of left me in Chicago, with no portfolio. I don't think I had an official title other than as Business Manager. But from perhaps the early '50s and thereafter, I was really the principal. I didn't formally become president until we had separated ourselves from both California and Mexico.

And when was that?

In 1960. Then I became president. In fact, it took me several years not to be embarrassed when asked, "What do you do?" "I'm the president of a college?" I couldn't even get that out. "I run a little business."

In 1962, I was carted off to a tuberculosis sanitarium. When I came back, Pestalozzi decided to sever its ancient ties to Columbia. They felt, not insensibly, that Columbia was not going to make it, and we at best would be a burden to them. We moved out of Lake Shore Drive and all that. Jane ran Columbia during that time I was in the TB sanitarium.

For a great many years the times were hard. I didn't know where the next payroll money [was coming from].

Some of those same things are echoed by many of the people that I have spoken to throughout the project, and you said earlier that Columbia was part of the spirit of the times, and that it couldn't have happened at any other time. You know, where disruptions were going on on other campuses, what—
We didn't have any disruptions.

Right. Speak to that. You know, you talk about the civil rights movement, and the antiwar--
We were not disrupted in large part because we were not perceived, certainly by students and faculty, as being on part of the establishment. This didn't mean that there were no campus disruptions. Student radicals of that time or any other time can turn an institution on its head.

Did other institutions—did you ever get a feeling or know that

Columbia was a threat to other institutions, other schools?

No, we were a pariah, though.

A pariah. Explain that.

Well, we welcomed the enrollment of many people who probably wouldn't have been accepted at ordinary collegiate institutions, and we occupied an area which none of them seriously stressed. Many institutions, historically had arts and media departments, but we were the first institution to coalesce them all. We had a kind of monopoly, which we didn't set out to get, but everybody else's inaction gave us a monopoly. I remember somewhere in the late '70s, the Chronicle of Higher Education, or one of its predecessors, did an article about the collegiate and career interests of high school juniors and seniors in the Chicago region—six counties. Among the thousands of students surveyed, only six percent expressed an interest in Columbia's educational and career focus. But 40 percent of those who did express an interest in arts and media subjects would enroll at Columbia. Which meant, in effect, that 60 percent would study these specialties at other institutions in the United States, which hardly constitutes a monopoly. Obviously, Columbia enjoyed a disproportionate number of such students. Surprisingly, no other local institutions sought to compete. Then again, no institution's curriculum offered the opportunity of integrated study in arts and media subjects.

In recruiting Bill Russo to the faculty in 1966, in a sense the College's focus was enlarged to include a music emphasis, though this did not represent a serious effort to give instruction in musical subjects. This would only come

later as similar instruction in art subjects and dance. Dance came out of the blue, when Carole Russell, a doyenne of modern dance, led me to recruit Shirley Mordine. One of the things which attracted me at the time, apart from her extraordinary talent and vitality, was that having her would signal Columbia's embrace of the principal fields of the arts: art, music, theater, and dance, though at the moment these were primitive study concentrations. In Art we chose to emphasize graphic arts in contrast to a fine arts curriculum, because I didn't believe we could - or should - try to compete with the leading arts schools and college art departments who offered more classical art studies.

Was there a case where there was just a person that you thought would be so great that you would build a department around them? Can you give an example or two of that?

Well, I certainly built Fiction Writing and English around Schultz. What Music effort we had was built around Bill. I didn't say, "Hey, here's a great area, I'm going to furnish it." It was usually, at least in my instance, born of wanting to give an individual an opportunity to do their best.

We were comparatively small. I controlled all the strings. I don't mean that in a manipulative way. So I could, if I got knocked out with somebody's attractions, their ideas, their energy and entrepreneurial spirit, I run with it. And I think most of Columbia's departments were founded with that view. Photography's a good example. We had recruited two prominent photographers: Lyle Mayer and Joe Sterling, and we had a darkroom which was half of this room. The

whole thing was rather absurd. Both taught at the old Institute for Design. Photography was a kind of a trade school subject.

In graphic arts, the department was organized around Herb Pinzke and Leo Tannenbaum, both brilliantly talented members of the Institute of Design faculty. And it really happened because I wanted to get these remarkable people, and give them a start and get out of their way. And that worked. I mean, that really is the secret. In time, the process of engaging faculty would have rules. I realize it's inevitable. I may, in a personal sense, rail against it, but I'm not critical of the fact that, you know, it's there. But most things at Columbia were begun when those restraints were not so present, or not present at all. I didn't know anything about contemporary dance, except my father hated Russian ballet, so that was easily ruled out. In fact, one of his dying statements to me kind of summarized his life, his instruction to me to "Beware of Russian ballet and mayonnaise."

I didn't have any restraints. I didn't have any rules, I didn't have any history, I didn't come up from an instructor to a professor to a dean to college president. I didn't know what the hell other people did. But I can't think of anything that began at Columbia, that I began, at least, that didn't have to do with my confidence in and stimulation by an individual. And I can't think of an exception, except well into the '80s. I realize it's perfectly necessary now, but I wouldn't have originated an Academic Computing Department.

I've often said that Columbia was an assembly of an unusual group of individuals, and I don't think of any exceptions, but... But it

genuinely was. Some of the great educational efforts in this country were similarly constructed. Go back to the history of the New School in New York, and Antioch. They were assemblies of outstanding individuals. There are a few examples, and I based myself on those, very consciously. The old Institute for Design was one of the most exciting educational efforts I ever saw, and it was very influential on me. I was very briefly a student there, when Moholy Nagy first came to this country and brought the Bauhaus with him, and my father had been helpful in bringing Moholy here. After the war I remember that for about two years, I.D. had more educational and artistic vitality than any place imaginable. They were at 632 N. Dearborn, where that big castle is, which we almost bought for Columbia.

Oh, yeah. It's Excalibur now, I think.

That's right. I.D., the Institute of Design was there for a few years. But I wasn't ignorant of what had gone on in education, partly because I grew up in an educational spirit. My mother was a devoted teacher at the Parker Practice Elementary School, which was the most experimental public school in the United States. It was on the campus of the Chicago Normal College, Wilson Junior College, Parker High School. So I had models. And I had seen what at the time was really in command of kind of a regimented, reasonably small school. I knew a fair amount about Antioch, I knew about Black Mountain College, I knew about Highlander Folk School. I wasn't doing all of this out of my wondrous imagination. So Columbia has always been- I mean, to the extent that philosophical

motive could be involved- has always been a serious educational effort.

You were talking about '67 and '68, things came together, and it looked like you were going to make it. Did a mission statement evolve then?

Oh yes. We always published a catalog, and it explicated Columbia's purpose. It didn't promise you a job and that kind of thing, but an enlarging human experience. Then about—sometime in '68, five or six of us spent time, a weekend or so, talking about consolidating ourselves and consolidating our appeal, and what were we gonna elevate. We reconfirmed the idea of limiting our focus, and avoiding becoming a comprehensive institution. And there were some very valuable people- I remember, particularly- well, Harry Bouras was there, and Gene DeKovic, a wonderful guy, he was at the College for about eight or ten years.

Is he still alive?

Gene DeKovic? Yes, he is. But at that point, we decided we were going to make it, and where we would base ourselves, and what themes we would stress, and the idea of giving recognition to some of the spiritual themes of the '60s. In fact, we had a couple of conferences. Another must have been in 1970, when we hammered out a whole perception of Columbia. I know that Harry Bouras was there, and John Schultz. But we also brought to that meeting Abbott Kaplan, who had been an old friend of my father, and who was then the president of the New York University at Purchase, which was organized around arts themes. And Dr. William Birenbaum, too; he was the president, then, of Staten

Island Community College, and later the president of Antioch University. I'm trying to think of where he was then. And we had Dwight Follett, who was the Chair of Columbia's Board. We weren't just flitting. We really knew what we were doing by then. These conferences really made a difference.

You talked about how important the time was, and talked about, you know, [society] as well—could you do this today?

No. It couldn't be done today. Maybe if you had a little handful of bold young people, but I doubt it. They wouldn't even have the resources Columbia had then. The world has become more structured. And once you're institutionalized, that's the end of that one. If you want to go to another one, you'd better look for another movement. Important social themes, or something. After all, radical movements are comparatively short-lived. America was in a kind of ferment from 1890 to, probably, the end of the Depression, and then the spirit after the war, and then again in the '60s. But nothing like that today. I think people are rather cynical now about the ability to alter the state of things. So I don't think a Columbia could have been born. I think it could only have happened when it happened, within a peculiar confluence of things abroad in the land and the emergence, briefly, of a remarkable group of people who were susceptible to causes larger than their own in immediate interest. Which I think is the cardinal matter of the whole thing.

Now, 30 years from now, I don't know. I would hope so. Maybe we'll, you know, I mean, I don't see the so-called global market economy as a permanent mortgage on social change.

I think the great issue is the growing separation, in America and everywhere, between haves and have nots. But at some point, even the seductions which are dangled before the have nots will be furnished in lesser quantity by so-called safety nets. Then what?

I want to change the subject, just because I don't want to neglect this, but how important was, and what are your memories, of the significance of the accreditation and that period?

It was cardinal! My father made an effort at accreditation in 1954 or '55. I remember Norman Burns was then the head of that agency, the North Central Association, and utterly dismissed the possibility of accrediting anything that was unlike the most conventional colleges. In 1967, I began a new quest for accreditation, which finally came in 1978. Accreditation was a pivotal occasion. And a hell of a struggle. And it wouldn't have happened, except for the presence within the North Central Association of a cadre of people who understood the '60s, understood what was going on in America, and, in a sense, welcomed an alternative institution. It wouldn't have happened without them.

Were those individuals that you could identify?

Well, some of them. Morris Ernst, who was the president of Antioch, and Joe Elmore, who was the dean at Earlham. Larry Barrett, who was the head of our first accrediting team and was a provost at Kalamazoo. Another, Conrad Quisenberry, who was a dean of something at the University of Iowa. They were sensitive, and not tied to old forms.

What were some of the—you said that it didn't happen without a lot of struggle.

In 1971, we sought candidacy. In those days, an institution had to remain in candidate status for three to five years before applying for full accreditation. We were inspected by a three-person team and they recommended against our acceptance as a candidate. But the NC Commission on Accreditation reversed that decision. The Commission then included some of the names I mentioned, and others whose names I never knew. I was later told that it was one of the few times that an examining team's recommendation had been reversed.

About a year later, the NC changed their rules to permit an institution to make an application for full accreditation within a three-year span, and we took advantage of this to apply for full accreditation in late 1973. Our Examining Team then was headed by Dr. Larry Barrett. I had never met the man before, but he and his team were remarkably insightful and genuinely studious. Again, I was told later, that our examination was one of the best conducted by the North Central Association. There were six members of the team and they and we spent 12 hours a day for three days talking about education. Their inspection was intense and encompassing. It was an extraordinary occasion, which ended with their recommendation that Columbia be fully accredited for a five-year term, which was the maximum time awarded newly accredited institutions.

Who from Columbia was involved in the College's first accreditation?

Well, obviously I wrote the self-study. I wrote all the self-studies in 1973 and 1978, when we got a 10-

year award, and was the close editor of our NC self-studies in 1983 and 1988. Dr. Louis Silverstein, then Columbia's Dean, contributed valuably to the work and intelligence of our '73 effort and similarly in 1978. In '83 and '88 Bert Gall, Lya Rosenblum and Denis Peacock were key participants.

I knew that accreditation was the mark of respectability. Pariah we may have been, but by God, our thorns began to disappear. If you're not accredited, you ain't worth shit in the higher education business, particularly now that they accredit [profit] schools and so on.

Anything else was the chaff in the threshing machine. Once we had that respectability, we took off. Parents couldn't say, "You can't go to that school, it's not accredited;" it was night and day. We did everything prematurely. We jumped the gun on the full accreditation, and we got the graduate school accredited when most of the counsel was "Wait 'til you've operated it for five years," and we began it in '81 and sought its accreditation in '83.

Now, your tenure at Columbia ended in '92.
August 31, 1992.

OK.

At that time, I had been president since—officially, I think, since '61.

Can I ask why you left when you left?

Well, I was nearly 70 years old, and I was tired of it. I suppose I could have hung on for another five years, nobody would fire me, and I still had my wits about me sufficiently. I was worn out with the thing, and privately, I was not... satisfied with my role, even though it was inevitable that it would become that of a corporate chief executive only incidentally involved in educa-

tion, and almost preoccupied with the business of the institution.

I still sat at the top and could approve this, that, and the other thing, but by that time, it... I had enough instances when I was enthused about somebody who was doing something at the College, and could give them \$5000 to do whatever it was they wanted to do, or go to the Yucatan. But the times and the nature of the College defeated that, and, God, if you have an original thought today, at any college, you have to go through levels of authority, committees...

The bureaucracy--

I was delighted to get out. In fact, the last year I could barely wait for it to end.

Do you think—and you've already mentioned, you know, the times are much different, and that the size of Columbia makes many of its original endeavors impossible, but does it still remain an alternative, do you think?

I think it's important. The stature and size certainly is impressive. It has a potential for... imaginative response to the neglected tasks of higher education. I suppose I would contend that the potential is there, though it would have to be exercised in an entirely new way. But I think that it would necessarily have to have a cadre of innovators, of people who—

I had a Board. I did not manipulate the Board, but I always valued it. They didn't raise a hell of a lot of money, but by God, they were all in tune with what we were doing. They were bright and alert. I wouldn't want to characterize them politically, because they had a variety of persuasions, but it was a Board with extraordinary humane currents. There were only 22 members, and there were at least a

dozen people who really busted their tails for years. I think you'd have to have a Dwight Follett back, and if there's another Dwight Follett in this universe, I'll hurry off this afternoon just to see him. We just had this peculiar, and I have no other word for it, confluence of all sorts of enlightened and energetic individuals and ideas and so on. I think it would be very difficult to recreate such a confluence. And it might be artificial.

But yet, it still seems like there's a need for alternative higher education and not elitist. If I were 25 years younger—I wouldn't mind being 51 or 51 years old—you know, and some fire still burned in me, I would think that I'd like to take a shot at renewing the spirit, though its expression would be in somewhat different terms than it was then. I think it's possible, but you'd really have to overcome a lot of things within an institution, I think, tenure arrangements and committee participations, all kinds of things. And going through all those levels and layers and in some cases, lightweights, would just be hard to absolutely defeat. That's why I said, you need a cadre. But boy, they'd have to take on some pretty ingrained structures, and you'd have to fight bureaucracy, staidness and sense of security, employment security. You'd have to shake up the whole place. Is it possible? Yes, I think it is. But it's so distinctly unlikely, and I don't know who that person would be. But we had so many advantages. We didn't have any money, so we didn't have anything to protect. For 10 years, you were gratified if you had a job next September. We talked for years about "Oh, we've gotta get off of the tuition dependency treadmill, and, you know, raise a lot of money and so forth,

and I know they're now talking about another capital campaign, and I can remember, now that I've written about it, at least a half a dozen efforts at major capital campaigns, which, no sooner were they announced than they began to disappear. I don't think Columbia has the constituency to raise great deals of money. It doesn't have rich alumni. We just don't have the typical instruments of big fundraising. We never enjoyed respect amongst a wide public or even notice by a wide public. I always wanted Columbia to be a contagious educational example.

Why do you think that didn't happen? I'm curious about that too.

I've thought a lot about that recently. In educational intention, I think Columbia was two institutions, in a sense. One sought every educational excellence. And while we might not have had a constituency for an institution of the most able college students, we were not competing with the Princetons or Harvards or Juilliards or Yales. Yet the level of instruction, and the quality of teaching and teachers, was, in all of the fields we focused on, as good as any, if not better than anywhere in the country. And as a comprehensive school of the arts and media, while there were outstanding people at other colleges, we had a great collection of them. We had good facilities, good equipment and everything else, and after '76, certainly the most ample space. We were always crowded, but, at the same time, we had a social philosophy of open admissions, and dealt with what are conventionally termed—I don't like the term—at-risk students, so that if you dealt with the institution as a collection

of these two worlds, an amalgam of these two, our outstanding qualities were diminished by our attempt to embrace two extremes, or the two constituencies. I think that the effect of that has been that we couldn't become Yale Drama School, or have that public excellence in any of Columbia's fields, because we sustained an emphasis on opening our ranks to all students. And I think that was the largest problem, or the largest contradiction in our whole effort.

I certainly wouldn't correspondingly argue that it would have been possible to make it as a typical elite school of the arts, or some amalgam of a number of schools for the arts. I don't think economically it would have been possible, given our tuition dependency and the absence of major gift dollars. Nor, in a sense, could you run a school of Columbia's interest for at-risk students exclusively. I think it was our effort to provide a valuable college experience for ordinary folk in an urban community, that prevented Columbia from being celebrated as a special school for the most talented students. I would argue that what we attempted to do is valuable in the larger social scheme of things, but if one expects public celebration for doing it, this couldn't have happened. Also, given the state of the whole society, you couldn't have had an institution that was an amalgam of the Yales and the Juilliards and the graduate school of film studies at UCLA and so on. There's just no physical or financial way of doing that. But if you could, I think the quality of instruction, and the quality of purpose, and the career emphasis might work.

There's no question that our embrace of a social purpose within

the context of a career-oriented collegiate enterprise never could have had great recognition or celebration. That, I think, is the largest explanation. In a small way, I think in a personal way, I probably failed to do the kinds of things that would have given us greater rank. I didn't get out as I might have, mostly because I just didn't like the spotlight. If you asked me what did I really want to be, I wanted to be the commissioner of major league baseball, 'cause I'm the most dedicated baseball fan.

They needed one! The job was open.

I realize that my greatest error was that I didn't write lots of articles like my friend Leon Botsky does, at Bard. Of course, he also conducts the American Symphony. And I didn't write op-ed pieces on a regular basis in The New York Times like Bart Giamatti did, in which I referred to baseball as a metaphor for America.

But I also didn't seek a lot of educational offices. I've always been personally uncomfortable with that kind of life, which also made it difficult to raise money. I don't like to raise money. I always felt I was raising it for myself, and that they would see through me. Oh, I raised money, but I was a bit too self-conscious about it. And also, I didn't like the people I had to raise money from. I just—I was a bad fundraiser.

No, but as a personality today, you probably couldn't make it today, because of the politics of higher education, you have to play that role.

And once you're viewed as a radical, you're not gonna attract money. But the real problem was that we didn't build a selective institution. I'm arguing that we couldn't have, but the fact that we didn't really

diminished our capacity, rather qualitatively, from enjoying high rank among institutions.

My husband and I were going to the symphony one night, and we were eating dinner next to this couple in their '70s. We got into a conversation, and they asked what I did, and I said I was teaching at Columbia College, and they looked at each other and said, "Oh, our daughter always wanted to go there, and we wouldn't let her, and that was a big mistake, we should have let her go." And this touches on many of the issues you just raised, because I think they equated open admissions with lower standards, and there was obviously an image problem at the time.

Yes, no question. But to some great extent, surprising extent, Columbia got over the hump.

With accreditation, or--

Well, with accreditation, with the growing number of buildings in the South Loop, and in part, because of the extraordinary publicity we always enjoyed, particularly under the days of Connie Zonka. For 17 years, she was the best press agent imaginable. We have presence now; there's no question that Columbia has presence. But not competitively with the old established institutions. And there's always this suspicion we are a raggedy place. And it prevails. Why are we regarded as raggedy? Because we have attempted to open up ourselves to giving opportunity to the masses. This is a very elite nation. So that's had a diminishing effect, I think. I wouldn't have chosen another path, but I also am obligated to recognize that it

created certain difficulties. And I wouldn't argue for perfect open enrollment. I think it can at least be selective to the extent that we don't accept obviously unqualified students.

Bert Gall, when I interviewed him, said that open admissions, the thrust of it had definitely changed, that at one time it meant open admissions open to non-traditional students, students who didn't fit in anywhere else, who didn't work well within an institutional structure, and now it allows for admission those students who can't go anywhere else.

Well, that's partly true. I don't think Bert and I are in perfect agreement on this. I think that the student pool, as it were, is vastly different than it was 20 years ago. Some of the best students we ever had were minority students, but, in those days other institutions were not competing for students who went to so-called minority high schools. We used to be the only Chicago institution that went to college days at most of the inner-city high schools. And when other institutions discovered that poor students were jingling a lot of student aid money in their pockets, it became a nice thing to expand opportunity to all Americans. Before, a lot of people came to Columbia, whether or not they had interest in our subjects per se, probably because we were one of the only independent college institutions in this region they could even go to. Then, as now, there were a lot of kids who were damaged irreparably by common school education, but you were also getting some who were pretty damn good. But you got a cross-section. Today everyone's persuaded that going to college is the only route to the badge of success. But

we are not getting the old proportion of very able students who are now choosing careers in medicine or God knows what. The major universities and colleges are competing for these students. So we don't get many. It isn't that they go somewhere else and study theater, but they go somewhere else and medicine is now open to them, law's open to them. So they don't have to come to Columbia. And, as a result, we're getting disproportionate numbers of the least able. And I think, probably, the numbers have just simply gotten too great of those. We always had polarity in the classroom, but it wasn't 65 percent on the least able side and 35 percent who were perfectly competent, as it is now. And just the sheer numbers that enter under the liberalities of open enrollment change the polarities in the classroom. A number of people around the College are arguing that we simply ought to have some kind of arbitrary test score cutoff.

You mean numbers-wise, or standards?

Those people forget the economics of running Columbia. They want some point, 16 on the ACT or 1000 on the SAT, whatever, I don't know. I've heard some of those numbers. And you have a group that feels that open enrollment should be preserved, but that it is possible to have a massive and effective remediation program, which I, at least, suspect is unattainable. I'm certainly all in favor of putting everything the institution can afford into all kinds of remediation, though I think the whole character of the remedial effort needs to be re-thought almost entirely. But in general, it has been unsuccessful, whoever's tried it. Though I think the

method is wrong, I don't have an immediate replacement. I can tell them what's wrong about it, but I haven't thought long enough or hard enough to develop an alternative. I do know that the spiritual antecedents and philosophical imperatives which Columbia did address in open admissions are not well spelled out in the self-study being prepared

What about another issue that many of the long-time faculty or administrators have raised about unchecked growth. Is there a point where there's too many students, or does Columbia need to re-think that, about its size?

Well, I realize there's been a lot said about that. In a sense, I think any such contentions crash on the rocks, literally, of economic necessities. You have an institution that's still driven by tuition revenues. During most of my time, the best we ever did was 93 percent of all revenues were tuition sources. With thoughtful limitations on some percentage of potential students, I think that enrollment can be sustained. Expecting a capital drive to raise an endowment of 200 million and having annual giving in a 20 million range is pie in the sky stuff. Which I, on occasion, almost believed, because I got so desperate to believe in it, but now that I've looked at the institution over the next 30 years I don't see a way out of the tuition defense. In a sense, I think Columbia needs to accept the fact that it's an institution with the character of many public institutions, the Northeasterns, the Chicago States. I don't mean the University of Illinois, which is very select. Southern Illinois. Our student body is probably very similar to that of Southern Illinois or Northeastern. We're like a public institution, and

I don't see a way out of that. Which may sound defeatist, but it's not, really. You deal with realities; we always dealt with realities. The College is, in comparative measure a lot stronger financially than a lot of private colleges. We have an endowment in reserve of something in excess of 40 million dollars. But that was another thing I learned early: to run the College like a business. If I don't sell enough merchandise, I won't be open tomorrow. And I wouldn't avoid saying that I can't imagine a better run business and a better run operation than we had. We were a hell of a place.

It's a unique story, there's no doubt about that. It's quite incredible.

It is, it's a real success story. As I said, part of that success came because we were just historically timely; that's probably the main thing. And the second thing is that within that context, we were exceptionally well run. Particularly so when you remember that we had to invest in buildings and endless bond issues and obligations. We made an enormous investment in instructional facilities, too. I don't think there's a better equipped school. And the miracle of Columbia's library! We started that library from nothing in 1968. Bert Gall, Harland Stern, and Cathy Slade were student library workers. And Hubert built- Bert really carried the ball over 25 years, but Hubert did begin the effort to build a wholly mature and entirely sufficient library. It's now more than 100,000 volumes. But that's all changed now. With computer access, everything written in the universe is accessible. But to build a college library in 15 years, that was as good as most college

libraries? Probably better, because it was more contemporary and it was focused. We built a college from nothing too. That's pretty amazing. Such an amazing success story is probably worth a few lines in the newspaper from time to time, but it's seldom written anymore. But it didn't get us a lot of money.

It takes money to raise money?

Oh, you betcha. But the first thing you have to have is people who are sufficiently inclined, and potentially generous enough to be susceptible to your appeal. And there aren't very many rich people that were. Columbia does much better in the grant area, where you're just arguing your case. We got a lot of grants. Lya gets a lot of grants. She is an ace fundraiser. And individually, Zafra Lerman is the queen of grant getting.

But there is no real profit in that. You can't take a big percentage of it and stick it in a general endowment fund, and you can't use it to pay teacher's salaries unless they're directly involved with the grant. I don't know where a constituency of rich people is, though I look at feasibility studies which say you need 25 corporations and 200 potential donors of \$10,000 apiece. As my old friend Mike Fish in the restaurant business said, "You can do anything with a pencil." But that's the problem. If Columbia had a lot of money, I would still hope the institution would preserve the emphases of the old Columbia. I don't have any instruction to offer my successors, but I have a variety of cautions. There'll be another president in a year and I doubt if any candidates will be a Robert Maynard Hutchins, or an Alexander Meickeljons, like some of the people who were collegiate empire

builders. I have the feeling that people who are genuinely creative, organized and entrepreneurial don't want to be college presidents.