

Columbia College Chicago

## Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago

---

An Oral History of Columbia College Chicago,  
1997 -2004

Columbia College Chicago Oral History Projects

---

2016

### Interview with Paul Carter-Harrison, 1998

Columbia College Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cccohx>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](#).

---

#### Recommended Citation

Columbia College Chicago, "Interview with Paul Carter-Harrison, 1998" (2016). *An Oral History of Columbia College Chicago, 1997 -2004*. 12.  
<https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cccohx/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Columbia College Chicago Oral History Projects at Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. It has been accepted for inclusion in An Oral History of Columbia College Chicago, 1997 -2004 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago. For more information, please contact [drossetti@colum.edu](mailto:drossetti@colum.edu).

## Paul Carter-Harrison

*It's the nineteenth of March, 1998 and this is the interview for the Columbia College Oral History Project with Paul Carter-Harrison.*

**If you could tell us what the circumstances were that brought you, you know, when you came and why did you come to Columbia?**

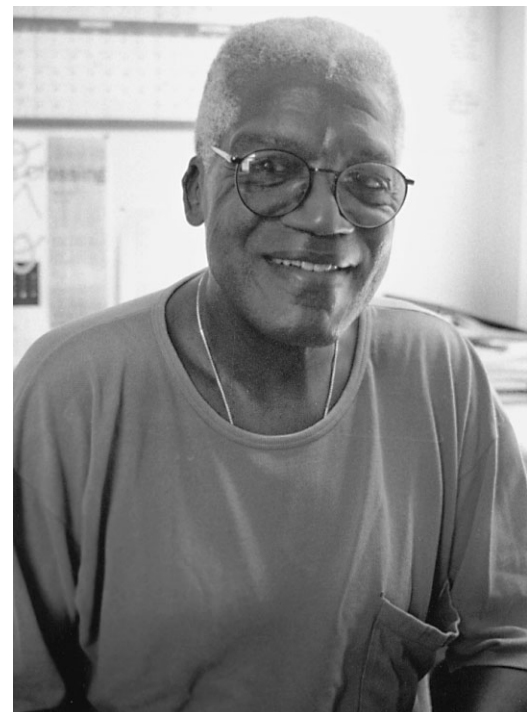
First of all, I was at the University of Massachusetts where I was a full professor in the Theater Department. And I was planning, I was in the moment of planning to leave there to go to California to make my way in the film industry when I got this call from Mike Alexandroff. He needed somebody to take over the Theater program here at Columbia. And I received this call asking me—I didn't know anything about Columbia College at the time—I just got this call and I was in Massachusetts, to come out and take a look at this. They were looking for a chairperson to run a program here. So I came out, in 1975, I came out to see what Columbia College was all about. I spent a couple of days here as I remember. And Mike Alexandroff and Lou Silverstein, at the time, Lou Silverstein was the Academic Dean at that point; Lou and Mike, they showed me around the College, the various facilities. The Dance Center was very, very impressive, I thought it was very interesting. I saw the one building that the College had at the time, they only had one building on Ohio Street; met some folks over there. They, after showing me the Dance facility and the one building they had, they took me over to the Theater facility near Belmont and Sheffield. And I walked into this

place and there were some children, some young people doing games. They had this woman there, who's unfortunately no longer here—Fritzie Sahlins, former wife of a very well known actor, what's his name Sahlins, he's a very well known Sahlins; very well-known Chicago actor. And this was his wife who was teaching classes there. Fritzie was teaching sort of improvisational games and they had maybe, I noticed, maybe about twenty kids playing games all day. And I sort of talked to them, "What's the program about?" And there was not much of a program. There was a music program but not much of a program, apparently. Just before that, just before I showed up there, Bill Russo had been the chairman of the Music Department and another guy, Ron, I can't remember Ron's last name, he was with the San Francisco Mime Company, he was the chairman of the Theater part. And both had left for different reasons. Bill Russo, I think, had gone to New York to do some stuff with his career and Ron was simply let go. And the program was floundering otherwise, there was no program either in Music or Theater. And it was just simply some part-time people coming around, teaching some classes, some music classes and some theater/acting games.

So at the end of the day, they took me to the airport and Mike sat down, he was very, very charming, amiable, and he said, you know, "So, would you like to take this job as chairman?" And I told him, "No." I said, "Absolutely not." And he said, "Well, why not?" And I said, "Well, you don't have a program there. What would I be

taking? I mean, first of all, I wasn't looking for a job, but since you offered a job I thought I'd look at it." But there was no program, there was nothing there. He said, "Well, what can we do to turn that around? You know, to make it interesting?" I said, "Well, you have to have a program to offer somebody. You can't offer this thing with kids playing games like that." I mean, by comparison, I mean, I looked at the Dance Center, it was truly operative, it was a wonderful set-up. Comparatively, it couldn't compare. So, Mike said, "Could you develop a program?" He asked if I could develop a program, I said, "Sure. I could do that." He said, "Well, I could have you come on as a consultant."

So I went back to Massachusetts and for the next year I would fly in once a month, once maybe every five weeks I would fly in and I would make observations, spend two or three days observing the



program, talking to various faculty members who were part-timers, maybe two or three people who were full-timers. And when I would go back to Massachusetts, I began to process, writing an entire curriculum for both Theater and Music. And I developed, over the period of nine months I guess, one whole school, academic year. Based upon my visitation and my research and my understanding of performative practices, I designed a program of Theater and Music that would have a kind of inter-relation, you might say, that would somehow feed off of each other, and had a very clear sequence of development for four years. And using that as a model, I mean, I gave them an entire model at the end of the school year.

And on my way to California I stopped in Chicago. Because, you know, I had made several visits now, I've finished my consultancy, I'm on my way to California, I drove through Chicago just to say hello to Mike, you know. They were very satisfied with the report and the whole thing. And then once again he said, "Now that you've done this, would you take the job? At least get it going?" And I said, "OK, for one year I'll take this job, for one year." So I went out to California and came back in the Fall, and then I started this commuting back and forth between California and Chicago but I was in place as the chairman but for one year—up at Sheffield. The second year, they were getting ready to rent space in the building they are in currently, down on Eleventh Street. And he said, "Would you please help with the transition, would you stay a second year?" And I said, "Yes." So I went through this transition. The third year came up and he said, "Well Paul, we're gonna have our accredi-

tation come up. Can you stay to help, you know, since you were in place these last couple of years we need to have somebody help us get through it." So I stayed a third year, the fourth year came up, nobody asked me to stay, I was already there.

But the middle of the year, Mike came to me and he said, "Paul, we're getting ready to buy this building. We need to know that you really want to be here in place and you're not going to be traveling back and forth. Do you really want to be here?" And I said, "No." And so we went through the business of securing a new chairman. That's when we went out and we found Sheldon Patinkin and brought him in in 1980. And I went out to California with a plan that I'd come one semester a year—which I did for the next five years. I came to teach for one semester. Fifteen weeks a year I would come in and, over the next five years, I would leave California and I would come in. And then at a certain moment, Mike said, "We really need to have you here more. It's not really cost effective to have this situation. We'd like to have you here." And I thought about it, I thought about what I was doing in California with the relationship to how much I really liked the teaching atmosphere at Columbia. I mean, it really was a different teaching atmosphere than the former teaching I had at University of Massachusetts and also at Sacramento State University. It was a quite different kind of atmosphere, the collegial character of it. And in fact, most of these people I was working with were all professional people in the field. And I liked that atmosphere so I said yes. I came back full-time. I guess it

was 1987, 1988, something like that when I came back, you know, on a two-semester basis. But back then, when I first came here in 1976, there were eighteen hundred students here. And, as a chairman of course, we always used to have these discussions about when were we going to cut off the number of students that we were going to allow in because it places too much stress on our resources. And then we had a cut-off point of twenty-five hundred. When we got to twenty-five hundred we said, "Let's make it three thousand." And then at the next, we said, "Look, let's make it thirty-five hundred, and then we have to cut off accepting more students." And as we know, that's all history, because we're now at nine thousand students in this institution—which, of course, has changed the entire character of the College. I mean, whereas, you know, in 1976 through 1985—for that first ten years that I was around and associated with it, I knew everyone in the College. I knew everybody, all the faculty members I knew. And I felt a certain intimacy; not just collegiality but a certain intimacy that you experience with all of the faculty people. Because you saw them quite frequently. But as the College grew, everything shifted around how to maintain, I think, these programs—which meant greater numbers of isolated positions, staff positions, and there are many layers of staff and faculty that come between you and the people that you normally want to associate with and be with. And as a result, people that I have had a great affection for, for many years, I rarely see them throughout the school year. I mean, there are people that I have known for twenty years, that I have had strong feelings for them and I don't even see them more than three times a year, four times a

year. Whereas in the old days, you saw them all the time; you had lunch, you'd hang out a little bit, you know, it was quite different.

**I want to come back to that—talking about how things have changed—but I need to back up. How did Mike or Louis, how did your name come up with, that brought you to Chicago?**

I think, I'm not sure, I'm not really sure. I never did ask directly but I think there was an actor they were looking at. It was an actor or director friend of mine that they had interviewed and he must have given them my name. And my work is very well known, particularly in the black theater, as a writer/director and a theorist, my critical writing and things like that. My work is pretty widely known. If you're not involved with reading in the black theater, you might not know that work but anybody in the black theater—who's involved in black literature, black theater literature—they do know that work. Because I've had some similar works that have influenced the direction of black theater apparently, that's what I'm told... And so, this person, I'll tell you his name, this actor or director, I can't remember his last name, I think he was being interviewed and he must have left my name with them. They contacted me back then. And, it was a lot really, I said, "Chairman of the department and Performance Department, what is that, what could that be?" And then when I finally accepted the job, I must say, when I met the other chair- people I thought it was the most interesting group of people. You know, John Schultz was in Fiction and English. I found him to be very, very interesting.

The first meeting I had with those people, we had a chairpeople's

meeting, retreat, at a place in Lake Forest when I first came to work at Columbia. I went to California, I came back and I came to this meeting. Lya Rosenblum, Bouras, Silverstein, John, Mike; it was very, very interesting. I will never forget that because I don't know these people and yet they were all very impressive. I mean, they were very, very impressive around the table. They didn't seem like an ordinary scholastic body on the table; these people were old friends. And not only were they old friends, they were very bright old friends, they were very interesting people. And I found it impressive. I was what, forty years old then. I was, you know, it was already, I was a mature man and thought that I had achieved a lot of things and yet I found myself amidst people that had also achieved a lot of things. And, you know, but then in the middle of the first day of these discussions, there was some kind of, in this meeting, something had happened that seemed to betray the faith, the trust of one of the other people, party, in the situation. And this big emotional thing turned and I thought, "Look at these people! They're having this big emotional eruption right in front of me." And I didn't know where it was coming from but it was incredibly forthright and the kind of thing you would not see at a normal faculty meeting. That's when I realized I was in the middle of a real family situation here. It was a family sense of betrayal and recriminations and acrimony and then, of course, by the end of it, it was over and we had nice wine and fruit and the family came back together around the fruit and the wine and the cheese and there was this wonderful ambiance all over again. To me, when I saw that then

I said, "Hey, this is the place for me. These people are honest people, these are truly honest people." And I think that Columbia's always struck me as a place that had an honest mission.

**What, could you describe in your own words what that is?**

One of the things was open enrollment. It was not a false idea. They understood there was some kind of problem with open enrollment. Open enrollment meaning, that you give everybody in the city—particularly inner city—an opportunity. The open enrollment situation required other kinds of services, as we found out over the period of ten or fifteen years. We found out that, you know, you can't just have open enrollment without giving students opportunities to catch up on their skill base. But the mission of making access, these kinds of skills in broadcasting and in film and in theater and dance, to kids who normally might not have access to it, to me it was a real honest mission. And I think that the President, Mike, has been unrelenting in that posture. I mean, how can I walk away from a man who has a mission, I mean, you know, who had a vision about this? And people who were around him like Louis Silverstein and Lya Dym Rosenblum, these people all were highly visible in support of that kind of mission. You can't walk away from that. I hadn't seen this kind of honesty any place. I've lectured in many schools: Smith College, Amherst College, Wesleyan. I mean, I've lectured all around in a lot of different places and it was sort of academe as usual without any clear, you know, sense of, the people who worked there didn't have any personal mission. They were not attentive to any larger mission as well. They were simply teaching. So, in those times



I really felt that I was part of a larger kind of concern; a very humane interest in the education of inner-city youths—and that's kind of euphemistic in the sense that we're really talking about black youths and Puerto Rican or Latino youths.

I was very interested in how that played out for these black students and I'll tell you how much I was. At a certain moment, I found myself, after the first two years of being here, demanding that they change the English—however much I hated to do this because I liked John and Betty—but I demanded, I mean, I was on the opposite end of the Story Method that John had. John felt that the Story Method was all that the students needed, period, to be able to achieve good English skills. And what was apparent to me in the classroom was that these kids did not have any skills, particularly black kids. The black kids were miserable in their writing skills and their English skills. And I went to these faculty, these chairpersons' meetings, adamantly against this continuation of simply one process which was called the Story Method—which is all about imagination. And these black kids would go in there and use their imaginations and they would come out with these magnificent, imaginative story-telling kinds of project but they had no skills—in basic I'm saying—on how to use the construction of the language. And I wasn't putting down the method because the method served people who already had skills even better. So, if you came from the suburbs and you had some basic skills and you had the opportunity to take a Story Workshop, the Story Workshop method opened that

mind up, applied those skills much better. But my kids, the black kids, I call [them] my kids, Lya Dym Rosenblum often says—Lya is one of my closest, she is like family to me—and Lya said to me, "What do you mean Paul, your kids? These black kids are your kids?" I said, "They are my kids." She says, "No, they're all of our kids." I said, "No, they're not your kids, they're my kids. I'm the one, I feel more accountable to them, they feel accountable to me. They are my kids. I am very concerned about what happens to those kids." Not that I don't care about what happens to the white kids but I know that the disadvantage that those black kids come in here with. I have to be more concerned about it and they have got to know how to read and write.

And so, I challenged that whole thing about, you know, the Story Method. Not as a method, but how useful it was for those kids who did not have these proper skills. And ultimately, a more traditional kind of expository kind of writing, you know, expository writing, sort of Composition I, changed to what's traditionally Composition I and they finally got it on the table, into the classroom. And I must say, over the last ten years I've seen a lot of difference in how the kids are writing. First of all, the supports that we have for these kids here, they're writing much better. And they don't have to be nearly as busy with the black kids in that regard. You know, that's, all of our children need to know how to do that as well as be creative in their thinking and in their application of language. I mean, it is very, very, very important. But in those early days, it was, it might seem like, I could not simply sit there and let that happen, make sure something

more practical came out of the educational process for these black kids. And I'm not just simply saying, I'm not the watchdog over black kids, but in some way I feel like I am that father figure, that person that they should be able to trust, you know, when they need mentoring and things of that sort—come and talk to me about what they want to do and how they want to do it.

#### **And that role has continued?**

It's continued. I still have black kids that are not gonna make it in the theater. Some of my colleagues say, "Paul, why you can't, why do you tell them they're not gonna make it?" I say, "I know they're not going to make it as actors. I say, 'Go do some other thing in the theater. Become a technician in the theater. Go into the promotion and marketing part. You're not gonna be a good actor.'" Now, a white President is not going to tell this black kid that. I will tell them that. "Go there, you're not going to make it here. Go into management." You know? There's nothing wrong with that. If you can make that judgement, it's a judgement. You can see, after a couple of classes, it wasn't meant to be. You sit in a class, a person's writing plays, a person is writing, writing plays; you can see that person is not gonna be a good writer of plays. They might be a very good writer of advertising copy about plays but he will not be a playwright.

#### **That value that you place on having someone that the students can identify with, was that also part of...**

It was not part of the job description.

**No, but do you think, is that part of Columbia's mission as well and have they done a good job of that?**

What, you mean hiring other blacks...

**Or women or...**

Women? I think that Columbia has been very fair. Frankly, I think Columbia has been very fair in its hiring practices. Now you must remember that hiring practices is pretty much tied to departments, and each department makes a determination of what they need. And so you have to go through these eight or nine personalities in one of these departments and they each have their own kind of way in which, how they shape the personnel around them. And so some people are better than others at doing this. Now, my department, Theater, as far as I'm concerned there's, the black presence is not there. I mean, for years there's only been three of us there, who were full-time. This year, they hired two more people part-time. There are about another twenty other people who are there teaching. I don't get involved in the hiring process or anything like that at the College, but I think that I would have done a little something different. I mean, I get involved with some of the curriculum issues. Like today, I have a meeting with the black students over there because the black students are not getting enough opportunity. That was an issue that I had ten years ago. Ten years ago I told the chairman of the department and the College, "Black students are not being utilized properly." And as a result, a contest was created Columbia College created a national contest for a black play, which we called the Theodore Ward prize after this famous black playwright of

Chicago, who's no longer living but was a very important playwright in the '40s. We give two thousand dollars to the first prize, five hundred dollars for the second prize; first prize gets a production. And as a result, the black students are guaranteed at least one full production... and then there's a stage meeting of the second prize. It's still less than enough because we look at the way activities have shaped the Theater Department right now; there's always activity going on: directing, activity in directing, projects, students directing various projects—there's only one black acting, one black directing student there at the moment. So as a result, you know, you can't service all the needs of the black students. That's why I'm going to this meeting today to find out, what are the ways they might find to create opportunity. There's a notion that the black students don't come out to audition. I mean, I was told this recently, they don't come out to audition. The truth of the matter is that when they did go out to audition, they were never cast, you know, and that's why they don't go. So we've got to find projects with them. And these kids, we're talking about maybe thirty kids, and of the thirty kids, maybe a handful of them are getting an opportunity to work. That's a drag. That has not been dealt with. There's a tendency to put blinders on to these kinds of—not directly racist—kind of gestures, but, blinders to the lack of utility, blinders to this, not enabling people to be able to function. And there's a tendency, if you have such a reputation as being a very liberal institution, blinders to various kinds of breaches, social breaches—be it women, or blacks, or minori-

ties, whatever—there are these breaches that go on and, that we tend to put blinders on in the department. All right, so, it's up to, then, people like myself to say, "OK, I'm not going to fight all the battles but this one over here, I can deal with. It's my responsibility."

**A recurring theme is this issue of size and growth and that no one, no one, some people don't mind it or mind it less than others, but no one knows when it's gonna stop. Everybody thinks it should stop somewhere, but there's no plan. Does this contribute to some of the problems? I guess what I'm asking is, when you first came, would it be easier to say, "This is an issue that needs to be addressed" and have something done about it?**

We did that, we tried that. The four years I was chairman, each year we simply cut it off. In those meetings we had cut-offs.

**All the chairmen agreed on this?** We all did. We were gonna cut off at twenty-five hundred. Then the following year we said, "We cut-off at three thousand, they'll cut off at thirty-five hundred" Then suddenly, it was four thousand. We could see the problems, administratively, of how to handle that problem. And again, the support that is necessary for that kind of growing and the kind of demands on the resources meant new buildings, more of this, more of that. So, the growth factor has, of course, altered even the question of competition for various resources the C College has. And thus, the College has become incredibly political in the last three or four years in terms of maneuvering around the available resources. Some distrust, in fact, in what people, how people secure some advantage, you know, new

spaces, new positions, etc. So, that might be part of the growing pain, that might be part of the whole thing. It requires very strong leadership—I'll tell you that—to keep all that in harmony, in a harmonious kind of development. And clear vision, clear vision about why we are going in certain directions is most important to acquire. To simply acquire buildings and acquire human resources doesn't necessarily mean you're growing. You might be growing, you know, in a horizontal kind of way, but not necessarily vertically. You know, you're not, you've got to have some end that you're trying to reach and not just simply take on development. And that's a major problem. I think it's a major problem. I, I mean, I don't hope to ever feel as intimately connected with the College as I did when I first came. In the last five years I feel I've become less and less intimately involved with it. I feel commitment to that corner of the College that I'm dealing with, playwrights. I've expanded my offerings in playwriting; I've connected with the Fiction Department as well, I've opened that up. Of course, I've connected with the Liberal Arts people...

**OK, how has the institution influenced your own work professionally? You know, your tenure here, your whole experience at Columbia?**

Well, first of all, it gave me a home base to, you might say, allow my own work, it's a springboard for my own work, in other words. I, suppose you could say I used the opportunity of being around other people of like interests, for example, Catherine Slade—who is a highly important figure in performing arts. Other people who are—Shirley Mordine in Dance, Bill Russo in Music; these various

figures all play into helping me to organize my thinking around certain kind of ways of doing performing arts. And, I've even had opportunities to do, for example, a collaborative project that included music/dance/television and academic computing all in one project. So in other words, there are certain multimedia ideas that have sprung out of my being here; having access to all these kinds of facilities. So I have used it as a testing grounds, sometimes, to apply to larger ideas in my work. And it has shown up in my work. The work I've done over the last two years all have elements that have been tested here at Columbia, technical things, technical ideas. It has also been, as I said, basically a home base for me, which, you know, I can go to. I mean, I've had an opportunity to sit still in one place.

When I was in LA working with the film industry, all I could do was work on film projects, run around in the industry, never could sit still and work out ideas. But here, I can teach my classes and develop my plays, sit on various panels, have opportunities, larger opportunities to be exposed to ideas. That's what I'm about, I like ideas. I like to develop ideas. So, Columbia has been a home. It's also very inviting and understanding about the need of the artist to continue to... and one of the things that was always, I found very interesting about Columbia was its initial inclination, you might say, its initial development. Mike Alexandroff said the school will always be a place of, however he called that, a final economic consequence. In other words, when I came here or when other artists came here, most of the artists were people in the

professional fields; never thought of it as a place of final consequence, thought of it as a place that supported what they were doing. At the same time, they brought something to it from the field that they thought was useful, educationally for the students. But largely, the students supported the fact that people, fiction writers, filmmakers, directors of plays, were doing other things in the field. And this is what made the marriage such an interesting marriage, unusual marriage unlike most academic institutions, one that supported and also promoted, you know, working outside of the institution. [Columbia] even supported a lot of work financially. You know, if there's any way they could, you know, use the equipment or something for the College, use studio space, etc. In other words, we were given access to things to help do what we do as performing artists or as, you know, visual artists, etc.

So I think that particular part of being here has been most useful to me. I mean, the kind of access that I have to the field, to theater, and that I have, working at a traditional university, I know that, in fact, my first book of essays came out when I was at the University of Massachusetts. And a new book of essays—which turned out to be the particular Bible on what the aesthetics of black theater should be about—twenty-five years ago, I guess it was. And the book came out, I had a play on Broadway, a hit play. And people walking around the halls of the building thought nothing and cared less. It was like, "Hello, how are you doing?" Then I went to a meeting shortly after that, and in this meeting they were very pleased with the work they were doing at the university. They thought it was much more interest-



ing than the work that was being done in the commercial theater. And they kind of laughed at the kind of inanity of the work done in the commercial theater. They were doing all of the wonderful classes. At the meeting, this is what they were talking about—which meant they had no respect for a person like myself who was a professional in the field—which is what made Columbia attractive to me. When this thing came up, when it first came up, I said, “This is interesting, I’ve never been at a place like this.” Now, we’ve changed, obviously. The greater number of students, no one can simply have people working in the professional disciplines of the arts but we have to also come away with a certain kind of humane development, a sense of, they must have some knowledge about themselves and the world they live in. They need that, you can’t argue that. And that changes things then. It means that they really must concentrate more on some kind of corporate structure, as well as develop their skills in these other disciplines. And I’m all for that part of it. I mean, I think it’s essential to the culmination for the person. You just don’t sit around and, you know, dance all day and don’t know anything more about...

**That ties into my next question that, and maybe it hasn’t, but what is your personal vision of education and has that changed when you came to Columbia or since you’ve been here?**

Well, no. I think when I came to Columbia, the first thing that attracted me to the area was that it was a place that supported my presence, my continued presence in the profession. That was the first thing I was about. Secondly, as I became

involved in what the institution is trying to do and how we were all grappling with fine tuning the curriculum, it became clear that we could not have what we had when I first came here, which was a kind of a liberal arts component, was a kind of a supermarket, you know, kind of an approach. You came in, you took the courses you liked and those courses you didn’t like, you didn’t take them. Lya Dym Rosenblum, I think, played the most significant role in gaining some structure to it. She was adding some structure to how the course offerings that were presented to make a human being, to make a well-formed human being. When a person says, “I have a Bachelor’s degree,” it means they have some basic understandings. It doesn’t mean they know everything, they have basic understandings. They know how to read and they know how to write and they have some understanding about the world that they’re in. To me, if you don’t have that, you don’t have education. There are a lot of people who are intelligent who have no education, who might be intelligent at, perhaps, blowing glass—can be an intelligible skill; do it magnificently—doesn’t mean that they’re educated. To be educated simply means to have gone through some investigation of the world that you’re in and you become, some fundamental understandings about how you relate to the world and that you finally are able to exploit that understanding in a very useful and productive way. If you haven’t done that, then education has failed you. You have not been able to take that information and exploit it in, you know, in a productive fashion. And in that sense, some people don’t respect their education and exploit it for venal reasons or unproductive ways, you know. But

still, I think that I have that responsibility—to give people an education here—and that they should know how to read, they should know how to write, they should understand the humanities. Fortunately, quite fortunately, Columbia has not been... in terms of offering non-traditional kinds of studies in the humanities and history. Like African and African-American and African-Caribbean studies, I shouldn’t say studies, but courses that relate to it. There’s no African-American studies program here, but the effort is certainly a battery of courses that would allow any student to have access to that information, as a choice, as an alternative to some other traditional Western, you know, kinds of studies. So I think the school has been very fair in that respect.

**Have the changes in the curriculum, that you’ve talked about and some of the things that you’ve fought for, has that been a result of the student population changing? If you describe your students when you first came...**

There hasn’t been a student population change. Basically, the university started back about maybe ten years ago when Reagan was in power here in the government, when he insisted that a student must have a C average or he cannot receive his grant or something like that. Whatever that particular restriction was—in terms of grant monies—a lot of the population of black students fell off as a result because they came from a harder time, basically not because they were black, but simply because, as black kids, they were not basically trained in the high schools. And so a lot of those kids fell off. And not only that, the competition, when Columbia became popular you



began to see students not going to Bradley and Illinois State University. We're living in a media time and all the kids living in the suburbs think of themselves as filmmakers and actors and all that. So instead of going to these other state institutions, they all, the school just becomes inundated with suburban kids; not inner-city kids, inner-city white kids and inner-city black kids. The biggest population change was in the inner-city Latino community which has grown enormously, which is a good thing. But there has been an erosion, I think, in the number of black students that were here, that came into the College. And that's where the competition is different. The physical body, it's a much more of a white institution than it used to look like twenty years ago. I mean, I think almost half of the institution was, with eighteen hundred students, I would imagine nine hundred of them were black. This is, you know, an estimation. But the presence is very, very clear. Twenty years ago, if there were eighteen hundred students, I would say, nine hundred of those students were black. I'm not even sure there are nine hundred black students here today. You know, whatever twenty percent, I think twenty percent of what, nine thousand students, whatever that is, you figure that out, I'll tell you how much we have here. But it's not so much a numbers issue. It's not a question of numbers, it's a question of the way, programmatically, things are being laid out. For example, in the theater: clearly, the Theater program does not address the interests or needs of those black kids. There's no question about it. And simply that it's a program that addresses the interest of suburban

white kids—no question about that. I mean, the black kids had to search far and wide to find a text that they can relate to other than the fine text that most of the acting classes; most of them have to have one black text, usually a play by Lorraine Hansberry, "A Raisin in the Sun," or a play by August Wilson. But as far as the body, the opportunity for them to have access to materials that they can develop as actors, is not there. In my class, called African- American Theater—which I teach in this department, Liberal Education, can't teach it in Theater because I won't get anyone in there so I teach it over here—and when I teach it here I have twenty five students, and normally there are not more than three students from Theater.

#### **Really?**

The other twenty some odd children, young people, not children, but young people, come from other disciplines. I mean, rarely do I have more than three or four people from the Theater in the class. And it's been that way since I've been teaching it for the last ten years over here. When I first had that class, in the Theater department, I usually would get seven or eight students. Because the way the curriculum is set up, the demands on them to do other kinds of things, somehow they get around to this and get Humanities credit for it. So the department, this is not an indictment for the department, it's simply that the department is set up to address the population of people that they really are concerned about. The black students, who are meeting for the first time this semester, two new part-time people were teaching them, teaching, what do you call it, Voice Training for the Actor, two black actors were brought in. And

I'm not so sure, I mean, my estimation, this is off the cuff but the two people they brought in... speak well. They have good diction and clarity within the, you might say, socially accepted way of doing things inside of the Euro-American style of work. These are not two people that I personally would hire because I don't think that they are sensitive to the layers of possibility of using black language.

**It sounds like what you're saying is that the department, in its desire to address maybe some of the issues that you've raised, they're still, though, trying to assimilate the black student... Into something else.**

**...as opposed to addressing or expanding...**

Expanding the expressive strategies, expanding it.

#### **And exploring other...**

And exploring other kind of ways of doing things, you know. For example, there's a class over there called Black Theater, which a lot of the black students take, but unfortunately, at this moment as we speak—and I don't have to address it, I'm trying to stay out of it, but I guess I have to address it—it doesn't do what it's supposed to be—black theater as a styles level class. And styles, you have various kinds of styles: you have Shakespearean as a style, you've got Brecht as a style, you've got, you know, you might have some great styles of work. And this is African-American styles. Well, in that class, unfortunately, all they're doing is reading some plays and they're not dealing with style. What makes it style beyond the fact that it is a text? You have to go to the specific text, you have to get to the rhythms of

the text, you've got to look at Frederick Douglass, you've got to look at a speech by Jesse Jackson. You've got to use, you've got to find what, stylistically, makes it different. And I haven't addressed this directly, but I'm afraid I'm gonna have to. I've been trying to keep a different kind of profile on it, see what's in it. Well, if it lasts eight years, it hasn't gone anywhere, it's just simply for people doing contemporary plays and they read them, and they study them, and they do them in class, and that's that. That's not how it should be for anybody who wants to know about African-American styles. It could be Asian, it could be Latin, it could be white; if you go in there, either way you're coming out of there with style. You're able to learn rituals, you know, you're gonna learn something about that language and how that works; that's a styles class. It's not about whether or not you can go into a black play in there. You can do that on your own some other place. Come to my class and we'll read a black play then we'll talk about it and discuss it in literary style! These problems right now, which we're not addressing directly, you know, and it's all about confronting this. I'm having this meeting this afternoon at one o'clock with the students, the black students. This is the first time I've done that in the last ten years, put a sign up that said: Mandatory meeting for all the black students a one o'clock. And I've never done that...

**That's interesting.**

...because it sets up difference right away in the department. You know, you've got two hundred students running around there; you've got this black student sign. I don't want them to feel isolated but I

thought it was time to do it. It was time to say, "The black students need me in this particular place." You know, and I mean, let's sit down and we'll talk. What is it you want to do here? How is Columbia serving you? What do you expect to get here? These are the kind of questions you want to ask. Tell me, directly, what you want because I don't want to go and talk to the administration about these things without knowing exactly what's going on. You know, I don't want to be blindsided by my own self-interest in seeing something happen. I want to say, "What is it that you perceive to be happening; what do you think needs to happen?"

**Is this—I want to just return before our time is up—is this a result, perhaps, of this lack of vision? You talked about how important and how you couldn't say no to Mike's vision and he is gone now...**

I couldn't say no to Mike's vision, I could say no to Betty's. If I was to come through here now, not knowing anything else, unless I needed a job, then I could probably say, "Well, I can go across the street and work there too. I could go to DePaul and work."

**Is that because the institution has become too large?**

It's gotten too large. There are not enough conduits of communication, you might say. There's not enough sense of collective mission. There are independent goals. In other words, the goals are, the goals of the Photography Department are quite different from the goals of the Theater Department and the goals of the Theater Department are quite different from even the Music Department. And as a result, that department is the Music Program. I

was the one who put the Music and the Theater Department together as one department, and it's been that way for twenty years. And slowly that has been eroded because the two people who are involved in there have each got different missions and then now, they're getting a new building, the Music Department is getting a new building right next to the Theater building. And now it's gonna become two departments; not one program.

**I guess what I'm trying to get out of this, is that because, can you point to the size or is it the...**

We're not gonna have a leader that says, "Look, this is where we're going; this is why we're going there." If that leader tells us we're going to go this direction because there's nothing out there that remotely resembles this and it is an opportunity—for these particular humanistic reasons, and an opportunity for these professional reasons—to do something in a particular way that nobody else is doing it.

**And was Mike Alexandroff, was he one of a kind, that there's no heir apparent that could come in and do that for the College?**

There are two things: Mike was a visionary, but as it starts to grow you have to handle that with, what do you call it, not restrictions but, there's certain caveats involved here. You have to say, "OK, we're going to do this, open enrollment, but you've got to put certain other things in place." And that's where Lya Dym Rosenblum has been most masterful and wonderful. But now, we're at a point where we're a different animal. And that animal needs to be directed somewhere, you know. Somebody needs to come in and say, "OK, given we have all

of this, and all of this structuring and all of this attention and all of this hardware and all of these buildings and this new visibility, what do we want to do with that? That's the vision.

**Does anyone...**

It's not the same vision that Mike had anymore, it's a different vision with the animal that has surfaced now. What do we want to do with all this? Do we want to become an academy, a professional academy with some liberal education aspects to it? How do we want to shape this thing? That's the real question now. It's not, Columbia, otherwise, could fall into just simply business as usual, people just coming, taking classes, going in and out, and then that's the end of that. It doesn't necessarily have to be this highly imaginative environment that it had been for so long. I think the last five years, it's started to get a little bit, not nearly as inventive in its way of looking at the future and where to go. I mean, we've acquired new buildings, new hardware, new human resources, new benefits, perhaps even new prestige but we haven't really moved in any direction—which I find to be unfortunate. We're losing the grit, those people like John Schultz, losing a man like that around here, a very gritty man. Betty Shiflett, these are very inspirational people, Betty Shiflett and John Schultz. The current faculty in the Fiction Department is still very good. There are some good faculty people, they just need to have an overall sense of why are they here besides having a gig.

**And where will that inspiration come from?**

It needs to start, I think it has to start right from the top. The top administration needs to set some objectives for the College, some

projection, in fact, of where the College is gonna be in, say, 2005 or so, 2002. Simply say, "This is our wish list, this is what we'd like to see our institution become." Even to say something like, "We're gonna attach ourselves to the Disney company and we're gonna become an auxiliary training program with the Disney company and we're gonna develop along the lines of mass communication and public performing." It was that, and then says: "There's a goal." And then they understand how they play and plug into that. Do you see what I'm saying? It has to be, we have to take into account where are we in the new time, in the whole question of broadcasting/performing arts, you know.

**It's interesting that you say it, because it seems pretty clear from many interviews that for all its, you know, lack of money and in one building, but when the institution started, it was pretty clear to people what it was. Institution is the wrong word even. And I don't get that feeling from anyone that there's...**

It's not entirely right now about what it is other than this alternative experience or opportunity for hands-on learning. But hands-on learning for what purpose? I mean, I am very gratified that two of our [kids] came out of here three years ago and have made it so well in Hollywood; two black kids. I mean, one did that film called *Love Jones* and the other one did *Soul Food*. And I saw *Soul Food* the other night. It's a masterful film, it's a wonderful film. Now, these are two of our kids that just graduated three years ago, four years ago. That's great... to see that. I think now, people ask questions, "Why is this promising?" That part we feel

gratified about as an institution. But that's just two kids. That's just two kids, they happened to be very strong kids and had some support. They're black guys, I had them in class. We have one guy that came out of here, he was pretty well a mature guy, he won the Academy Award. The guy who did the film work on *Schindler's List* came out of here as well. So we've got a few people, OK, are we going to become a school of film trade or what? What do we want to see besides, simply, an opportunity for hands-on experience for kids in the suburbs who come in and want to hold a camera, take a camera home, shoot their family pictures and things and become filmmakers of some kind? Or, a black kid who happens to like things in Washington on television, says, "That looks easy." And then he comes to college and becomes an actor and comes in here and plays around doing some plays and then four years later there's nothing for him to do. There was a black guy who was in the last play we did in the Theodore Ward class, the guy's in his forties. He's been at Columbia for four years, never was on the stage for four years, got his first opportunity to work in a play this Spring. That is outrageous, that is outrageous. Something is wrong here, something is wrong here, something is definitely wrong here. So we need to ask ourselves, "Are people just coming in to do a gig or do we have a real, are we obliged—in a very real way—to move these people toward some kind of economic consequence beyond here, and is that consequence part of a larger mass media kind of interest, entertainment: what does that look like?" That's the vision we're talking about. It has to start at the top and it has to definitely be inside of that area called the dean, the Academic

Deans and all those administrators need to be on the same page.

I'm not sure they're all on the same page. Right now, I think the administration is very much about the logistics of managing the place, the logistics of management of this institution as it's currently set up. I'm not sure that there's any long-range sense of what that vision can be. Even as there's talk today about having another, yet another, dean—which I find objectionable, frankly—another dean come in as a Dean of Education. There's another layer to come through. We have an Academic Dean, a Dean of Education, that person's responsible for one area called Liberal Arts. See, I'm not sure what that really means anymore, what that's about. I'm not sure what that really means. I mean, why is it impossible to have an associate with the Academic Dean, and somehow it's possible to make the deans flow better within the whole system here? It's kind of troublesome in that sense. I mean, it's, other than managing what we've got, as opposed to making some kind of projection of what we'd like to see as being part of the contiguous relationship with the original vision. It's modifications, it's the kind of modifications you must make as you grow, no question about that.