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Interview with Paul Johnson, 1998

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Paul Johnson

It is September 8th, 1999, and this is an interview with Paul Johnson, who is the Director of Human Resources at Columbia College Chicago.

All right, let's get started by talking about—tell us when you came to Columbia, and what the circumstances were that brought you to the school.

OK. This is actually my second time around at Columbia. My first time was in September of 1977, when I was hired to direct something called the Labor Studies Program, which was an idea that came from both the President at the time, Mike Alexandroff, and a member of the Board, Frank Fried, both of whom I had met when I was campaigning for Ed Sadlowski, who ran for president of the Steelworkers' Union and was a friend of both of these gentlemen. So the idea was to take some of the kind of unique courses that Columbia had out into the community, to various union halls, and offer them to a very different audience than the one that we had at the time. And while that part of the program was just getting off the ground, we also started something called the Southeast Chicago Project. And when I left in '79, to be the general manager of the Rosemont Horizon, Jim Martin and then Dominic Pacyga picked up that project and turned it into a terrific film, as well as an archive that continues to this day. And Dominic just did a book based on the photos in the archive. So that's sort of a very short synopsis of the 1977 to '79 period.

What was your relationship with Mike Alexandroff, [and that would bring you] to Columbia? I met him through Ed Sadlowski, whom I was campaigning for, who was running for the international presidency of the Steelworkers' Union. And Mike was a friend of Eddie's, and had hosted fund-raisers for him and done a number of other things for him. And Frank Fried, who was also a friend of Ed's, and active in the campaign, was on the board of Columbia at the time. And through those two, through Frank, really, and Eddie, they talked to Mike about doing this labor program, and he was interested, and then they suggested that I, who was living in the Boston at the time, call him and talk to him. And I came out and sat with Mike, and we talked, and decided that we'd give it a try, and see if we could put this thing together.

Did you actually teach?

Yes, I did. I also taught a course in the undergraduate program, in what was—was it the Liberal Studies program at that time?

Mm-hmm.

But Lou Silverstein was the chair, and I taught a course called The History of the American Worker.

And had you taught before?

Yes, I had.

OK.

Yeah, I'm trained as a historian.

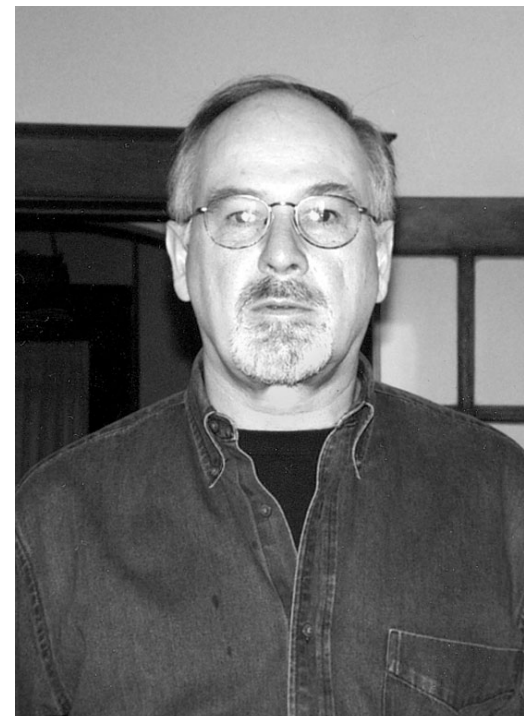
Oh, OK. Because I think that would be important as well, if you want to expand on that a little bit. You know, what your work had been.

Right. Previously, besides a background in history, in Boston, I was

one of the people who started the Boston Community School, which was an adult education school that started in 1973. And I taught similar courses, as well as did program development. And then when I came to Columbia, I taught the History of the American Worker course in the curriculum, and then various other courses outside in the union halls, and it also got other people to teach other things, then, [that we ran] out there too.

Maybe you could take a little time and describe a little bit more, maybe, the courses and who the students would have been.

The students for the History of the American Worker course were Columbia students at that time, so the classroom looked very much like a Columbia classroom does now, pretty much a wide range of students. It met once a week at night, so I probably had a few more older students, and most of them working full-time, because of the



night course aspect of it. The people that took the courses out at Local 65 Hall out on 95th Street were union members, male and female, and they were primarily in the Steelworkers' Union, although there were some other people that were also invited from other unions.

And was that from a historical point of view as well? I mean, the course that you taught at the union?

I'm sorry, Erin, I have trouble hearing.

What was the content of the course that you taught to the union members?

It was similar to the course that I taught here, that being the idea of the program was to take courses that we did here and take them out into the community. For example, we also offered a course in graphic design and newsletter. Most of the locals out there had folks who did local union newspapers, and were looking for tips on how to make them better, or how to get them started. And so we ran courses like that, too. Which I didn't teach—part of running the program was getting people to go out there and do that.

At that time, what would you- and make a distinction, if there's a difference- how would you describe or define the mission of Columbia as you understood it, and what you personally were trying to accomplish through your role at Columbia?

It really tied into the mission, as it was explained to me by Mike when he hired me, because at that time, Columbia obviously was a lot smaller than it is now. There were

more people who were probably working—or a greater proportion of people who were working part-time, in various kinds of jobs. And seeing that we were, you know, the idea of the College was to reach out to all of the different social classes, economic classes in the metropolitan area, here was a group that certainly fit that part of the mission. And then by taking it to the Southeast Side, it provided an outreach for Columbia to people who weren't going to come downtown to take classes. So it really did fit that other part of the mission, which was, you know, to provide the kinds of education that we did, for anyone and everyone in the metropolitan area. How did you reach out to people that, you know, weren't going to come down here at 7:00 at night, but would go to a central place in their community at 7:00 at night? So that was the premise that we built the program on. As for the teaching in the classroom, obviously, it fit, because there were a goodly number of students in my class who came from, you know, that kind of working-class background, who really didn't know anything about that history. It was an elective, it wasn't something that people had to take, so you got people taking it for various reasons, but one of the primary ones was, you know, "I'd like to find out about this. I heard about it from my father or my grandfather or my grandmother," that kinda...

What were the circumstances, and why did you leave Columbia, and then what brought you back? I left in 1979. I continued to teach through the end of that year. We actually did a seminar, that we offered here, called Work and Out of Work. And at that time, we had a visiting scholar by the name of Tom Cottle, who had been doing

oral histories with working people who had lost their jobs, and the impact it had on their families. He was a psychologist, social psychologist in the Boston area. And Mike had brought him out here to teach. And so he and I taught this seminar called Work and Out of Work. And at the same time, the Labor Studies Program was ongoing, but when I left, the focus of it became more this Southeast Chicago Project, which was an attempt to preserve the history, as well as the artifacts, the photos, the... you know, what this neighborhood was like. And it couldn't have come at a better time, because that was 1979 when we started that project, and it wasn't but a few years later when, really, that whole community was brought to its knees by the fact that the steel mills were closing rapidly and reducing their workforces. Evidence now, you go down there and look, and you know, there's lots of empty steel mills.

Mm-hmm.

So that—that was a classic example of the Columbia mission, to have done that project and to have preserved all of that way of life. And as I say, it's still actively going on now. It's housed at Washington High School. And my understanding of it is, the senior class, every year, has a project, to continue to search out materials for that archive.

I know that the book did quite well, better than anyone had anticipated.

Yes. It really did. I think Dominic is still going door to door with his book. From bookstore to bookstore, I should say.

So, now, why did you leave at that point? Why did you leave Columbia?

Well, it's interesting. It was sort of a—sort of a Walter Mitty opportunity. Frank Fried, whom I mentioned earlier, who was on the Board, was the founder of Triangle Productions, which, during the '70s—through the late '60s and through the '70s—was probably the major popular music promoter, promotion company, in the city. Ranging everything from folk music and the music of... oh, I don't know... I brought groups in from all over the world, really—to the fact that he was the promoter that brought the Beatles to Chicago.

Now, wait: is this Fred Fine?

Frank Fried. Fred worked for Frank.

OK. They both have those double Fs.

Yes, and people tend to [confuse them]. Although if you met them, you would definitely not confuse the two.

And Fred Fine worked for Frank Fried, OK, and Frank Fried offered you this other opportunity.

Yeah, Fred was no longer with Frank at this point, because Frank had sold Triangle Productions to Madison Square Garden.

OK.

And... having gotten bored with Madison Square Garden, had come back to Chicago and had gotten the management contract for this new arena that was gonna be built in Rosemont, called the Rosemont Horizon. And so that's where we hooked up. He came to me and said, "Look, I need somebody to run this thing day to day. I'll make

a deal with you: you are the organizer, you know how to put things together; I'll teach you this entertainment business." So it seemed like a fair trade, and as he put it, he said, "We'll have a lot of fun, and we won't have to hurt anybody." He was true to his word, and so in the fall of 1979, I went to work for Frank. And spent the next six and a half years doing that.

And was it a leap at all, to go from, say, labor to entertainment? (Laughs) Or how, you know, was the transition? Smooth?

Well, it sure was when it was first proposed to me, but as Frank pointed out, he said, "I'm not looking for somebody who knows something about the entertainment business. I know all about the entertainment business. I'm looking for an organizer." That wasn't a leap. That's stuff I had been doing for more than 10 years.

Mm-hmm.

And that's what he was looking for. Otherwise, he could have hired somebody who, you know, was in that business. That isn't what he was looking for. And at the same time, I did have a significant background in sports, and was one of the things that was gonna have to be added to the pie. It couldn't be just, you know, music entertainment. We were gonna have to do everything from, you know, circuses to truck pulls to basketball games. And actually, what turned out to be the fun part of the job was that there are certain things that you know you're gonna do. You know, rock shows and those kinds of things. But the stuff that you created, that didn't exist, or that you took a flyer on—that was where the real fun and the real promotion came in. And that's the kind of thing that Frank was really

looking to do, because we knew we were gonna get so many rock shows, we were gonna get the circus in September, we'd get—you know.

Could you give an example of maybe one of the promotions that you created?

I remember a day, sitting in this temporary office in Rosemont, the building was still under construction—or reconstruction, because the roof had collapsed

Mm-hmm, I remember that.

These guys came in, and at least once a week, someone would come in with some harebrained idea. You know, we're gonna play baseball in there, we're gonna play football—although somebody later did come up with an way to play football in an arena—all kinds of things. And in come these three people, talking about putting these huge, oversized trucks in the area and pulling a sled from one end to the other.

(Laughs)

Now, not being someone who one would classify as a motorhead, anyway, well, I just sort of looked at these guys and thought, "OK, these are the nutcases for the week." But they made this whole pitch, and told me what it did, and what it was about, and I had to truck in 10 tons of dirt and build this track... but they said what's going to happen is that, you know, you will get a family crowd, same kind of people that go to the drag races, that kind of thing. They will show up, you won't have to do advance sales, because there will be little or none. And all of these things, none of which made any sense. And they said, "Well, you're skeptical. Come out to Denver,

we're doing it in the old arena out there." They had an arena at that time in Denver that was very much like the Amphitheater. The reason for that was they had a brand-new arena in Denver, which I had to go look at anyway, and they wouldn't let them in. They didn't want the dust, the dirt, they figured the weight would crack the floor and all the rest of it. And you know, these guys were true to their word. Everything they said was true. The show was at 8:00. At 7:00, there couldn't have been 20 people in the hall. At 8:00, they were using a bullhorn to tell people to come back, because they had added a show the following night. They stayed, they were right, people drank more beer than they did at, you know, wrestling matches, boxing, anything you could think of, and yet it was guys bringing their kids. You know, if you were a Ford fan, they had a Ford cap on. It was, you know... and we took a flyer on that, and once we found the right dates to do it—and the dates turned out to be in the winter, pretty much, we used to do them three days in February- we would sell 40,000 tickets. And gradually, the thing became more elaborate, they had monster trucks and ran over old cars, you know. They eventually did it in mud. And I'm sure it's still going on, I still see it advertised [now and then].

Yeah, no, exactly. Well then, when did you come back to Columbia, and why?

I came back to Columbia in '89. I had always maintained my contacts with Columbia, and particularly with Mike. We saw each other socially, and were quite friendly. But after the accreditation, that last accreditation, one of the things

they had told the accreditors that they would do, is because they had gotten so much larger and had so many more employees, that they would develop a Human Resources Department. They would organize that. And at that point, I was working for a company in Chicago as their employee relations manager. And we had dinner one day, and Mike said, "Would you be interested in coming back? We're gonna have to put this together, and would you like to come back and do it?" And I said, "You know, it sounds interesting." So I had dinner with Bert Gall one night, and we talked for about five hours about what it was about, and decided to take a flyer and do it. Because one of the things I've always enjoyed is starting up things that aren't there. And that's how I ended up back here. I came back here in August of 1989.

If you could take a few moments to talk about, you know, starting it up, and what were some of your ideas that maybe you felt that you brought to Columbia, and then describe, as well, what Human Resources at Columbia is. You know, what it is that you do.

Actually, what Human Resources is here at Columbia, and the way we've defined it and run it, is it really involves all of the issues that deal with the people at Columbia. And sort of the mission statement of the department is that it is in fact the people at Columbia, the faculty and staff, who make it possible for Columbia to do the great things that it does with its students. And if we can make their lives better, make their lives more secure, provide them with programs and benefits that reassure them, that's gonna be manifested in the way that they deal with the students, whether they be working in Financial Aid or whether they be

teaching in a classroom. And based on that theory, Human Resources really deals with everything, from all the various benefits, hiring, and dealing with employee relations problems, dealing with terminations, if it should come to that. But most of all, providing a place where—whomever it is that works here has a place to come and either be served by virtue of a need for certain benefits that they have, that we offer, or to deal with certain problems or issues, or to look at their own career and say, "You know, I really like it here, but I'd like to be doing more, what else can I be doing, what should I do to become an academic advisor," or whatever they were interested in doing.

So it really runs the gamut of career planning, and benefits, and hiring, and also the day to day, you know, relations between people.

How involved was the department in, you know, the latest issue of the formation of the union of the part-time faculty? Or was that something that was separate from human resources?

Well, I was one of the people that negotiated the contract with the part-time faculty. There were four of us. So, obviously, I played a role in that, both having the human resource background, but also having labor background, which made the whole idea of a union contract and what goes into and how to go about doing it something that I was quite familiar with. So I actually enjoyed that.

From one of the part-time faculty members that I spoke with, they came away from those negotiations with a really positive feeling and said it went very well.

Could you speak to that just a little bit, what your impressions of that process are?

I think one of the things that I learned, interestingly enough in the entertainment business, [is] if you make a deal, and both parties go away happy, you're gonna do business with that person again. You're gonna be able to work out the problems that are gonna come out during the event in a much better way than if you walk away saying "Boy, I really took them to the cleaners. They really didn't get anything." And, in fact, I think that's how the negotiations went, you know, once you do the initial feeling each other out kind of thing, I think it was pretty remarkable that we went from, you know, a blank sheet of paper to a complete contract in six months.

Mm-hmm.

That's rare. And come out with, as you said, somebody in the part-time faculty feeling that they got a good deal, and I certainly feel we got a good deal, as an institution. And I think it'll be beneficial to both parties, but most of all, I think it'll be beneficial to the College. Which both sides certainly proclaimed that they were interested in doing. I think the contract bears that out.

Was there a transition period to get the institution, as they say, or the administration to feel good about the union, or not feel bad about the union? Or was it just once it was accepted, once it was reality?

Yeah, once it was reality, once they had, you know, won the representation election, people said, "OK, well, now the next step is to write a contract that we can all live with," and not end up with a contract that, you know, is 300 pages long

that nobody understands, so we spend all the time arguing about what it means. Or a contract that is so cumbersome that no one can ever really make any decisions based on it, and at the same time deal with the monetary issues, which of course are the primary driving force in any contract negotiation. So, no, there wasn't a whole lot of, you know, fear once it began. I mean, sure, no one was sure what was gonna come out the other end, but unlike a lot of places, there wasn't a real anti-union sentiment. If you go back and look at the literature that came from the administration, it's far gentler and kept in mind that we all were gonna have to live with each other afterwards, no matter who won the election. As opposed to kind of scorched earth policy that, you know, has been certainly prominent in a lot of places, in union campaigns.

Do you—and again, I'm trying to step carefully, only because it's such recent history and this Oral History Project has been going on—I've been interviewing people almost as long as, you know, this development. But no one has really spoken to it, and I think it's important that the project, you know, doesn't leave this kind of chapter out. And I was just curious as to, you know, if you had any other insight, or why a union was necessary, or why—you know, any other comment you'd like to make on it, just so that, you know, people that return to this material say, "Well, why didn't anyone mention the fact that these part-time teachers formed a union, you know, at this point in the history of the College?"

Well, I think that if you look back on it, part of it was a communication issue. The other part of it is, unlike many places, we have a very

large number of part-timers. But a significant percentage of them, probably close to 70 percent, are people who are practitioners in the fields that, you know, they're teaching. So, unlike a lot of institutions where all of your part-timers are people who are, you know, folks like me, people who got history degrees in the '70s, and there were no jobs, and you have to piece together a living. While there are people doing that, certainly, in Liberal Education and in English and fields like that, you have this whole other group of people who aren't interested in full-time work at Columbia, but are interested in being considered an integral part of the institution. And that kept coming up in all of the discussions that we had. And also, they felt that they weren't being paid enough, which is certainly a good organizing principle. I've used it myself. *(Laughs)* It usually gets people's attention.

***(Laughs)* That's right. Absolutely. And let's return, just a bit, to the Human Resources. Has anything changed in the—what is it, 10 years, going on 10 plus years, needs that your department has had to address that maybe were not foreseen at the beginning, or just because of the growth of the College? You know, what you're doing differently now than you were 10 years ago?** Well, when I started in 1989, Columbia had, you know, benefits that it offered to its employees. Because there wasn't a department, and because there wasn't anybody you could really go and sit down with and say, "How does this work?", we didn't get the kind of mileage out of them that we should. And people didn't have the understanding of them that they

would come to have. So that was a big, big job. How do you communicate, everything from how the health plan works to the pension to life insurance—all of these things that most people, on any given day, don't really want to read, but on certain given days, they desperately have to use. How do we make that employee-friendly? So that was a big organizing piece. The other piece that need to be organized was as we continued to grow and continued to hire, many of the things that we do here are regulated by the government, either the federal government or the state. And it's not hard to trip over those rules and get yourself in trouble, whether it be on how you run—how you do your hiring, how you do your advertising, issues of equal opportunity. Columbia—one of the key parts of Columbia's mission is that it wants to look like the metropolitan area that we're in, [and] that means that the faculty and staff have to look like that too when you're hiring—all of these things need a lot of tender loving care, because they're issues that are very important, but also because of the regulations, they're also very touchy. So I think that was a major area, and a major reason why we needed a Human Resources Department. Another reason was that people did need to know what the boundaries were. Where do I go if I'm not getting along with my boss? Where does that supervisor go if he's got an employee and he or she are not working up to what the expectations are? How does that person turn that around? Who will help them? Who will tell them what to do, what to say, what not to say? Those kinds of things you spend an awful lot of time with, and—

OK, I have to stop you, because I have to turn the tape over, and I have to put a pacifier in my daughter's mouth.

[Go for it.]

Hold on.
OK.

And we were talking about the purpose of it.
Mm-hmm.

Did that part get caught, or not?
No.

OK. Then we need to do that. OK, well, the overview, or the vision, I guess, that we have is based on the thought that both the faculty and staff here are the key resources that the College has. And if you can enhance their lives, if you can give them programs and benefits and attentions that enable them to focus more clearly on what they do, that that's gonna be reflected in the way they treat the students, whether you be somebody working in Financial Aid and dealing with all of those struggles day after day, or somebody in a classroom. So that's the basic premise, that what Human Resources can do is—certainly can make life better for the folks that we're asking to do the jobs day to day here. How do you go about doing that, then, becomes the question. And one of the key areas in that is the kind of benefit programs that you develop. And that was one of the things that became primary when we started, was how do we take what we have, how do we build on that, and most of all, how do we get people to understand and appreciate what they're about? Because there was really no communication, short of the kind of booklets that insurance companies put out, which are written in insurance-speak, and nobody in their right mind will read. So we

devised a whole communication [part], took us six month to take all those programs and to write them in what I call English, rather than insurance-speak. Put together a benefits book that anyone could understand and use as a reference, so that at least if they had a question about whatever it was, whether it was the pension, whether it was health care, life insurance, whatever, they could at least look at that and then call and ask a question and not feel like they didn't know where they were at all.

Mm-hmm.

The other, reverse side to that was, as we developed the benefit program and as it got better, and as it was more and more enhanced, that is a great recruiting tool. But it's not a great recruiting tool if people don't know what it does and how it works, and what all the parts and pieces are that they have, should they need them. So again, it goes back to that kind of communicating what it's about to folks, and at the same time, over the 10-year period, we've added any number of benefits to it, and enhanced the ones that we've had. [All of the time], which I think I was telling you about earlier, when most employers, including colleges and universities, were trying to get out from under their benefits programs as much as they could, trying to get people into HMOs and managed care and have people pay more and more for their benefits, make more and more of their benefits optional, create these cafeteria plans where you would get so many credits and then you were on your own, go pick, you know. Do you want so much life insurance, do you want disability insurance, do you want this, that and the other

thing? Which is fine, if you know what you're looking for. But my experience is most people don't.

Mm-hmm.

If I'm 26 years old and you say to me "You should really take disability insurance, because the chances of you needing it somewhere in your career are pretty good," you'd say, "No, gimme an extra week of vacation," you know, which is what I would have done at 26. So we stayed away from that, we felt that the department was gonna be one of those places where people could also get good advice, and that we would take leadership role in these things. And I think that, if I look back on the whole department and as it's grown and the things that we've done, I think that the whole scope of the benefit program, which I think covers the waterfront, takes care of people and the kind of everyday needs we have. It provides things that people will need at certain points in their life or their career, and it also gives them some real good head starts on taking care of things when they get older. Saving for retirement, having a first-rate pension, those kinds of things, that when we're younger, we don't think are all that important, but when people start to get into their '40s, they realize that this stuff is really important, and gee, how does it work, and what can I do to, you know, to take a more active role in this. So that, I think if I look back on it, I'd say that the benefit program is sort of a pride and joy.

Mm-hmm.

And it's also—because one of the responsibilities that we have is hiring and retaining people, I think a first-rate benefit program is a great way to retain people. I think it has a lot to do with our low turnover. People can always go

someplace else, particularly the staff, and get paid more. But they're not gonna find better benefits, better working conditions, better hours, those kinds of things. That we can certainly compete with anybody on.

It's interesting that, you know, a lot of the old-timers—if I can use that—but they came to Columbia kind of through a mutual friend or a friend of a friend, and now you're talking, really, about having to compete, obviously, for employees and how you're going about doing that. That that has to be a pretty significant shift between, you know, the early days of Columbia and the Columbia of the year 2000.

Yeah, and I think it's also particularly important when you look at the economy that we're in now, and also looking at the whole technological revolution that's really impacted a college like Columbia.

What other challenges have you seen Columbia face, or do you think that Columbia will have to face, beyond, say, attracting and retaining quality faculty and staff, etcetera?

Well, I think that's a challenge that's not gonna go away. I mean, I think that's going to become a greater issue as we continue to grow, and as we continue to age, also, as both a faculty and staff. Interesting, when I came here, if I did one retirement a year, you know, I could remember it. That's certainly not the case now. Again, because Columbia is now into its—what, 35th year, I guess, under its current design. A pension started in 1979, when very few people thought that they were ever gonna be 65 (*laughs*), let alone worry about having a pension, are now still here. And looking back at that

and saying "Gee, I'm really glad they did that back then, 'cause I sure wouldn't have done it." So I think that's always gonna be important. I think that the issues of people being able to work together, the kind of cooperative thing we try to teach our students, is a challenge. The workforce, particularly, as technology becomes more and more of an item, technology, while it does all kinds of wonderful things, one of the things it does not do is bring people together. And yet at the same time, we have a very diverse workforce, both culturally, racially, by sex, by age... how do we continue to see that those kinds of things continues, that kind of environment, which is so important to Columbia, continues? That's gonna be a big challenge.

Mm-hmm.

I think I said before that a lot of the things we do are regulated. We don't get a vote on those regulations. Some of them can be pretty onerous, some of them can be pretty obtuse. I defy somebody to explain to me exactly what the Disabilities Act is saying these days. I know what it says, I know what it was designed to do, but now, in the last five years, as the legal cases are being decided, there's a whole range of interpretations. How do you deal with those kinds of things? How do you deal with those issues? How do you deal with the family issues that have become more and more important? People needing time for their children, people needing time to go back and get more education or more training. All of those kinds of things, and yet the real need that we have is that when you come to work, [you gotta] get the job done. So how do you make those things palatable? How do you do find ways around them? I think those kinds of challenges are gonna be

[there]. A lot of them are—really, I guess you can call them workplace issues, with lots of different, separate focus. Foci, is that a word? No.

What has been—or how would you define education, and has that changed over time? You know, at Columbia, what that might incorporate.

Education in what sense?

Probably relating it to, say, the mission of Columbia, you know, and have your own ideas of what educating people means, has that changed in the years that you've been associated with Columbia? Has my idea of what an educated person is?

Yeah. And what you're trying—you know, what Columbia's trying to accomplish.

With the students.

Yes, as an institution of higher education. Which I know, now you're in Human Resources and deal, you know, mostly with faculty and staff, but you came as a teacher, and certainly, you know, that's part of... it's gotta be a related interest.

Yeah, and I taught three years of Freshman Seminar. I got interested in that when we were looking for a director, so I did—

Was that when you came back?

Yeah, I did it the last three Falls, except last Fall I spent negotiating the contract, but the three previous Falls to that, I taught Freshman Seminar.

Well, maybe before you get into this kind of vision of education, maybe you should talk a little bit about that and your experience teaching Freshman Seminar, and

what that was trying to accomplish. When was that program—when did that begin?

The program began in the mid-'90s, '94, '95, let's see—because I taught... when did I teach... '96, '97... yeah, I taught the Fall of '95, '96, and '97. So it must have started—I think originally as an experiment program in 1993.

OK.

And I think that is a great experience for anyone who is a staff member here and has an ability to teach, because you're really doing three things: you're trying to get people to grow roots and feel comfortable at Columbia, you're trying to give them an academic experience, and at the same time, you're kind of like a ward committeeman, you know. If it really works, the student's gonna come to you and say, "Gee, I'm really having a hard time, I can't figure out what to do about this financial aid question. Can you help me?" And you know, you can pick up the phone, and of course they're gonna take your call, and give somebody some direct service.

So the teachers for Freshman Seminar also seen as kind of advocates for the freshmen?

Yeah, I think if it works right, then you really are. You really are, in essence, a ward committeeman, a fixer, an advisor, someone who's gonna say, you know, "I can help you with this, but you're really gonna have to take this in your hand and do it, and here's how you do it, step by step." At the same time, you're doing this in an academic environment. The class has an academic umbrella that you're teaching under, and at the same time, it's a retention device, you know. How do we get people to stay? And I think... if you ask

me what's changed from—of course from 1989, but from the late '70s when I was here teaching, the sheer numbers of people coming. And I think the sheer numbers of people who come from secondary education experiences that were not very good is really a major challenge.

Mm-hmm.

And it's not only just that they went to a bad high school. I mean, there's lots of folks that had that experience, but there are others who went to good high schools but had a lousy experience, or didn't get anything out of it, or got very little out of it, and yet somehow feel that, you know, they want to be a photographer. They want to be a dancer. They want to be a theater person. How do you... how do you reach out to that person so that they can stay? So that they don't get overwhelmed by the fact that just because they want to be a photographer doesn't mean that they're just gonna come here and take pictures, that there's a whole lot of other things involved in it. That they've gotta have a voice, that they've gotta develop a voice, they've gotta develop something to say. That art is about expression, and they say, "Gee, I haven't read a book in three years that somebody didn't make me read." Or people who are so technologically hip, but can't translate that into an academic experience. Those challenges... because I remember teaching the first class that I taught in the late '70s, and having in the class students who were—you know, would have been terrific students no matter where they went to school. And having at least one person in that class who could not read, and it didn't even dawn on me until like the third or fourth

week, what that was. What was going on. And then everybody in between. That hasn't changed that much, except there's probably more high-end students now, in a lot of ways. As Columbia has become, you know, a school of first choice. Back in the '70s, we used to say that, you know, Columbia was the one school that every student knew about and not one parent. Well, that's certainly not the case.

Mm-hmm.

But it does present the challenge of... it also presents the challenge of a different generation of students, who are not at all intimidated by technology. But when you say, "I need you—we're all gonna go look at this art exhibit, or we're all gonna go to the Jazz Showcase and listen to this music, I want you to write two pages on what you saw and heard," look at you like you just asked them to jump off the roof.

Mm-hmm.

That's different. That's, you know... that's something I've seen, is a real, real challenge. I'll bet you see it in the classroom.

No, absolutely, that I've had some of the, you know, the brightest students that I've ever taught, and then some of the most ill-prepared, you know, in one class. And at other places that I've taught, you know, the range just isn't there. But you know, it has its drawbacks and it has its pluses, definitely. You know, I wouldn't...

Yeah, I think if you can teach under those circumstances, you know, you can teach anywhere. You may not want to teach anywhere, you know. I mean, I... I graduate student taught, and I

taught in one place in New York where, you know, everybody was determined to be a lawyer. Right, right. There's a certain excitement at Columbia, absolutely. But it is—because you wanna challenge the bright ones, and you certainly want to, you know, give a hand to those that are, you know—you don't want them feeling like they're drowning.

You don't want to lose them. Right.

And at the same time, you can't talk down to them. The one thing you can do, across the board, is insist that everybody do the work, and that everybody be there, and that if a freshman, you know... it sounds simple, but that's a lesson that some people really have a hard time coming to grips with.

Absolutely.

And that's a big change.

And I think that has—you're competing with the current culture as well, that that idea of being there and doing the work and not being a recipient of—I remember Paul Carter-Harrison got angry at a class once, he told me that he said, you know, "I am not a television, you know? Don't come in and expect me—you know, turn me on, and that you don't have to do anything."

Yeah.

And that's frustration, but I think that has a lot to do more with what's going on in their lives outside of the classroom, and what they've become used to.

Yeah, and don't you think that we now have a whole generation that's grown up being entertained individually by some sort of device?

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

I mean, when we were growing up, people railed about the television age. But television was so manageable, if you think about it, compared to—and while it certainly had its wasteland drawbacks, the absolute individuality of the technology now, the asocial nature of it... I mean, you can sit here and never have to talk to another person. Do it in a chat room, you know. How is that person going to become a functioning artist?

Right.

Or make a film, you know, to manage a crew, or be part of a theater production.

Those are big concerns, things that have come up. And I've been at Columbia since '90, but some of these are new. They had to do an interview, and go out, and I thought that would be the easiest thing in the world for them to—you know, that a Columbia student would be so willing to jump at that chance, and oh, you would have thought that I asked them to climb Mount Everest.

Yeah.

And that was something they really fought and fought and fought, you know, didn't want to get on the phone, didn't want—and I was shocked.

Yeah, there were two things. That one, that assignment where I had them go and interview a practicing communicator or artist, whatever they were interested in, and the one where they had to do a group project. God, did they hate that. And I pointed out that, you know, I wouldn't make you do this if it was just for me. If you were never going to have to do this again, I would

say, “OK, we don’t have to do the assignment, there’s not point to it.”

Right.

But tell me how you’re going to make a film. Tell me how you’re going to do theater. All by yourself. And not be able to work within a group, where the group organizes itself. And they have more trouble with that, and they would all come back with the same complaints. “Well, so and so was never available.” Or “I live too far away.” I mean, you’d eventually get the project out of them, but it was like... and that was the one thing I remember that I liked doing! “God, this is great. We’ll get four of us, we’ll divide it up!” *(Laughs)* “We don’t have to do as much!” Not one of them ever said that.

Right, right, I know. You get to the point where you’re telling them “Now here’s a good way to go about it. This makes sense.” *(Laughs)*

Really.

Who are some of the people that you remember the most, maybe from, you know, the first years that you spent at Columbia? Who kind of gave the place its character?

Well, certainly because of my relationship with Mike Alexandroff, I certainly think of him and his wife Jane as really epitomizing and being the epitome of what, you know, what Columbia was about. And just... I’m really impressed, taking it from, you know, a handful of students in rented space on Lake Shore Drive to what it became. Thinking back in the ‘70s, people that were there that I taught with... Jack Wolfson, who was the Development Director, is somebody that I really remember fondly, and was real helpful to me, both in

adjusting to Chicago and also he became a real great colleague in the College. I taught in Lou’s department, and there were a number of people there that I enjoyed. It really had a distinct feel to it in those days.

Uh-huh.

I’m trying to think who else... I know I’m forgetting people. Bert, Bert Gall was really helpful, right in those early days too, in getting the program off the ground and doing the kinds of things that we did. Jim Martin, who took over the Southeast Chicago Project when I left. He had some terrific ideas right at the beginning, when we were trying to put all that together.

Was he a teacher here at Columbia?

Yeah, he was in the Film Department. So off the top of my head, those are—I know I’m—I’ve forgotten some people, but who were, you know—those people in particular were ones that I dealt with sort of on a day to day basis, and they were all, you know, very encouraging and gave you a sense of why you were there.

Yeah. What do you see for Columbia’s future, gazing into your crystal ball? And we talked about some of the challenges, and you don’t have to necessarily go over that, but where do you see the College heading?

Well, I think... I think the next couple years are gonna be real interesting, as to where the College is heading. You know, you have a founder who sort of guides for a long period of time, and John Duff, who is President, took us into the next, you know, the next level of what we are as an institution.

And could you describe, like, what do you see his role—now that he’s on the verge of leaving now, I mean, what will his legacy be? What did he do different, you know, from Mike Alexandroff that was needed?

Well, I think what John did when he came in- and I’ll never forget the first meeting we had—he said, “You know, this is the first institution I’ve come to that wasn’t in trouble, that I wasn’t gonna have to, you know, close departments or buildings, or merge things or whatever.” He said, “That’s really a wonderful start for me.” And I think what John did was he looked at Columbia from the perspective that he had as an educator, and as Chancellor of higher education, and then also his role at the library, and brought some of the kind of structures and organization that that background provided him with to Columbia. And yet was wise enough, in his own way, to Columbia-ize them. That they weren’t going to look exactly like a traditional college’s would, but they would have some of these organizations, some of these structures, some of these features that other places had, but they would also have a Columbia look to them. And also, the growth that he’s presided over, in both the—particularly in the physical plant, and the growth in the institution’s financial security, and that has been remarkable. So now, you look to the future and say, “OK, what are we gonna—are we gonna continue to be who we’ve always said we are?” Mike defined it, John refined it and certainly insisted on it, on the mission. Do we continue? Do all the questions about retention and about the over-subscription of certain departments and under-subscription of others—what

happens? Which way do we go? Those are the questions. Do we cap enrollments? Do we cap enrollments in certain departments? Do we have some sort of minimal standard so that the poor soul who can't read beyond a sixth grade level is counseled to go to a community college and spend a couple of years getting those basic skills together?

Uh-huh.

And then come back? Do we have a way of doing that? On the other hand, maybe that fellow is the person that's going to, you know, be the next great filmmaker or photographer or whatever.

But it sounds like that you think that some pretty significant changes at least are possible, or will have to be addressed

I think the issues have to be addressed, but I think they have to be addressed with a clear understanding of who we are, and to be proud of who we are.

And not necessarily redefine that.

No. I don't think we should look like the places down the street. Because they're already there. And if that's who we end up looking like, why are we here? Because they're already there and they do that well. What we do, I think we do well. I think some would question how do we do it better, and how do we come to grips with the particular questions that open admissions engenders. Particularly the question of retention. You know, maybe retention is just a part of what I see as the William Bennett-ing of education, you know. You listen to what people like Bennett say about education and you think it should be run by Consumer Reports.

(Laughs)

It's an equation, you know. You come in this end, you come out the other end, you get this job, you make this much money, you do this that and you have a degree. Not very different than when I went to school. But it left out a whole lot of people who don't learn that way. So I don't think that's where we need to go. On the other hand, there's gonna be continued pressures about financial aid, and you know, how many people graduate, how many people graduate within six years, you know. What are the outcomes? That's the new buzzword: outcomes. And you can see it now in the public schools, you know. Paul Vallas is considered to be a genius because he's gonna have test results. Well, it seems as if I remember that from some 30 years ago.

(Laughs)

We'll see.