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Interview with Mark Kelly, 2001

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Mark Kelly

*All right, it is April 19th, 2001.
This is an interview with Mark Kelly
who is the Acting Vice President for
Student Affairs here at Columbia
College.*

And we'll start by asking when did you come to the college and what were the circumstances that brought you here?

I think it was August of 1984 and I was hired as the, I'm trying to even remember what the title was cause it was a long time ago but it was a career advisor, in the Career Planning and Placement Center and I was responsible for art and film and photography students.

And what was your background and how did you hook up with Columbia? Did someone find you, did you find the college?

Well, I'm from Chicago, but at the time I was working at Wayne State University as a counselor and had worked before that, at the City Colleges of Chicago as a counselor and in some various programs. But I had always had my eye on Columbia College. I didn't quite understand it, but it was clearly this quirky, unusual, artsy place in Chicago and it was very attractive to me and so when I saw a position, I just jumped for it and I wasn't quite sure why. I mean it's not like I knew the college that well, but I'm an amateur drummer, I loved being around the arts and this just seemed like this might be a real home for me.

And actually the position I was applying for was the director's position and I thought I was going to receive an offer to be the director and then at the last minute they

said, "no, you're not going to be the director, but we think this is going to work out so come on in and you'll sort of define your position" and I said, "okay." And then in many ways that became true that I've been redefining my position again and again in the college.

Maybe you can talk a little bit about that. Did that take you aback that there was some of that looseness saying well, we're going to let you define your role here or was that attractive and what did you do with that?

Well, it was intriguing. I mean in the end I think I sort of liked it. It was not what anyone would consider to be the kind of conditions that someone would want to enter into a job, because it wasn't even clear what I was entering. I didn't even know who my boss was going to be. It was absolutely a leap of faith. But at the same time it seemed to fit what I expected of this college, that it wasn't going to be, the rules weren't going to be terribly clear and that was fine because this was not the same institution as the ones I've been in and I was looking forward to it. So it was intriguing more than anything.

Who hired you? Like who were some of the people you met first when you were interviewing and took the job?

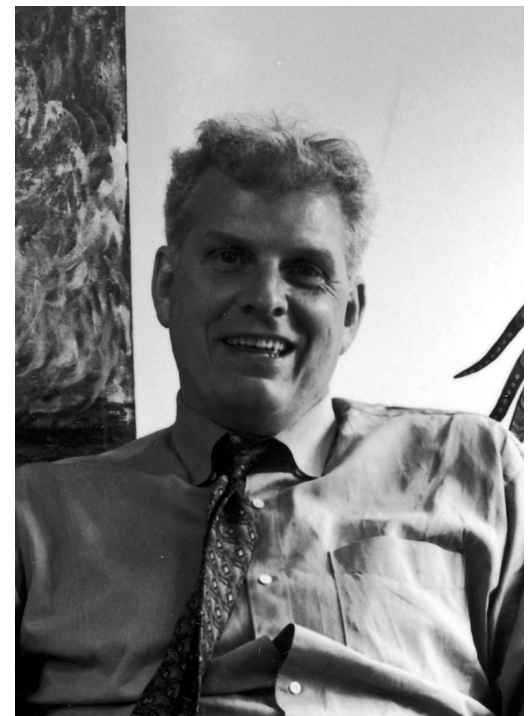
Herman Conaway, who was the dean of students and then in my last interview, Bert Gall, who was then, I'm not sure what his—it wasn't provost then, so I'm not sure what the title was, but he had a principle role in the college.

And what were your impressions of those individuals?

Again, this was not like any other college that I was going to be at and I think my interview started an hour late. It was just a free wheeling experience. There wasn't much clarity about what this was, it was just obvious possibility. And meeting with Bert like anyone who has met with Bert especially in those days, you know he had his long hair and I believe probably cowboy boots and a lumber jack shirt and this is you know like the CEO and it was well, this is not going to be anything like Wayne State University, that was for sure.

And so how would you describe that original role that you filled and maybe you could talk about how your position here has evolved over time?

Well, I think I've had about 8 different positions. Truly you know, this is a college of opportunity for students I think, because it's also



been a college that is constantly growing and constantly, it's maturing and changing. It's a great place. For me it's just been a great place to be because I was coming in—no one told me what to do, I did define my job. At the time there weren't internship programs in film, in art or photography. Even then they were three of the very important majors at Columbia and with our promise of a career outcome, there was the crying need and I just found every door open. Hey if you wanted to go for something, you know we talked about the old entrepreneurial spirit, it sure was true for me that I saw openings and possibilities and ran with things and I think created things that benefited the college, but they surely also benefited me and allowing me to grow and prosper too.

And you mentioned the internship programs, what were some of the other initiatives that you brought to this school?

Well, my next position for about a year and a half, was I became the director of academic advising. So it in many ways better fit my educational background, with the counseling degree. And there again, there was just a lot of opportunity. Columbia has grown so quickly. I think in many ways we've had a lot of immature systems and so it was always plenty of room for anyone to come—and well you need to work on that or we need to work on that. Oh boy, we have a thousand more students; we need to work on this.

One of the things we did right away and it was not just my contribution it was the staff's contribution, but overhaul orientation. Orientation before that was sort of well, if you want to go you can and

we'll share a little bit of information and it wasn't a tremendous emphasis on it. And it was a part of that emphasis on the free wheeling experience for students which now, you know in 1984, students clearly needed more direction and more support so we overhauled the orientation program and actually won a national award for that overhaul from the NAAA, the National Academic Advising Association, and just started to put some of the student services on the map in the college. Again everything is moving so quickly, the growth, the exponential growth. There was all of these services that were one man shops, that now were merging into units and it was a question of what the responsibilities were, how they were to operate and how they would connect other parts of the college. And so I was lucky enough, to be in a situation where someone who could help bring some direction to all that.

It was a need to bring direction to that and along with the Dean of Students Herman Conaway and Steven Russell-Thomas and some others, these were things that we worked on. It's always, I find Columbia just extraordinarily fascinating because of it's, not just its mission but it's the land of opportunity for students and for those who work at the college. Having come from Wayne State where it was hard to get a pencil and budget cuts and, in some ways we don't know how good we've had it at Columbia, where every year there's more than the year before. If you look at just the number of faculty to students, is it enough? No, but if you remember what it was like 15 years ago, boy things have gotten a lot better.

Can you in your own words state what you believe is the mission of Columbia and has that changed at all since you came in '84 or has it remained?

I think there's four or five primary ingredients that go into our mission and there's a tension between those ingredients, but if you took any of them out we would no longer be who we are. And the ingredients are the professional education and comprehensive education in the arts and media fields, the commitment to a liberal education so it's not a conservatory, it doesn't aspire to be a conservatory, the commitment to open admissions and along with that to opportunity and diversity.

I guess the other two I would add to that, are commitment to the urban environment. You know maybe that is connected to the previous ingredient but when you think about it, Columbia could only even conceivably be, I would argue in two cities in this country and that's New York or Chicago. You couldn't have Columbia. You could have something that might have some resemblance to what we are, but you couldn't have Columbia even in LA, because there is not—it's too defused, there's no public transportation, there's not the ingredients, there's not that incredible downtown area. Even Boston is too small for what this would become. So it's all of those things and then it's being in Chicago and our commitment to the urban environment that creates our mission. And I don't think the mission has changed.

I think there's inherent tensions between all of this; and growth and success bring new problems and I think there's been some who believe well, we need to do away

with open admissions or others that we should do away with growth. You know there's been tensions between the commitment to liberal education and professional education in the arts and media, but I think it all still holds together brilliantly and I think the college sometimes has confused the practices underneath the mission, with the mission. I think practices should change all the time.

Okay.

How we admit students in an open admissions environment, is something we should look at. I think there was a tendency then to make all the practices synonymous with the mission and I would argue the practices should be looked at and reviewed all the time and—

You mentioned open admissions, that maybe the way open admissions is done might shift or change. Can you think of any other examples where maybe the implementation of the mission might—?

Well, you know I think it was an emphasis coming out of—and not surprisingly when you look at the history of the college. Our mantra, I think in many ways in the early years from what I can gather, was just stay out of the way of students and let them do their thing, in fact let everyone do their thing, that rules and structure are the potential enemy and that I think worked at a certain time. But I think when I came on board we were already, I'm going to guess, about 4,000 students and so it was no longer this little, uncomplicated place and you have no structure. To fear structure I think, was creating problems in the college. Or to believe that the free for all environment was the key catalyst for what makes Columbia work, I don't think it was.

When I came to Columbia and maybe even more so now the students wanted structure. I mean we have to be careful that structure doesn't stifle creativity, but I don't think there's any evidence that we're stifling creativity at all. By the time I got here students wanted systems that worked, they wanted more direction of what courses to take. They wanted a curriculum that was a bit more predictable and majors that were shuffle—you know you'd ask someone what a major was. When I came into academic advising, no one could give me handouts for the departments of what was the requirements for their majors because that wasn't terribly important before.

You know what was important, was take courses in lots of different things and create your own major and so I think that's just another example where we've changed quite a bit. There are rules just like at other colleges, but the inherent opportunity for students to come here to try things out—which I think is actually words from the mission—or the purposes to create something are still here and that mission is still here.

When you talk about the students expressing a desire or a need for some of these things, a lot having to do with structure or perhaps resources, did the students change or you know what accounts for that?

I think to a certain degree the students changed. I mean it was no longer the 60s, so the environment had changed and the college had changed. I mean when I came it was still, even though it was 4,000 students, hardly a small college. But it was still, I think in many ways, thinking of itself as the little

kid on the block. It was, you know, are we going to make it to the next year? Even though it was all the evidence in the world to make it to the next year. My gosh, the possibilities for the college were clearly just full of possibilities. But there was still, because it just had started 15 years before that and I'm sure the founders, the consciousness of you know when you read in oral history about paying the bills you know it was all of that, but now it was becoming a big kid on the block.

And I think this has increasingly become true, students, as we mature, as our stature and prestige has increased students expect more from the college. You know in '83 things could be messy, systems could be messy and well, that's Columbia. No one is willing to accept anymore of our student body, well that's Columbia so I can excuse away something that I expect somewhere else. They expect all of the special things and the unique things that we are and we, also like student consumers everywhere, expect great facilities and good systems and efficiencies, etc.

You've mentioned growth and success have been two of the major challenges at Columbia you've had to face. Can you think of anything else or can you give other examples of what you see down the road for the school for better or for worse?

Well, you know it's funny how success brings both new opportunities and with it, its own threats. I mean I'm sure there's a fear, will success ruin Columbia? It sounds ironic but I think as this upstart college, as this open admissions college with a wildly diverse student body, will our success even in spite of ourselves make us—will

our student body change? Will we become more suburban in how we look? And who knows what a suburban means anymore you know with the changing demographics.

I think that there are some who would argue we don't need open admissions anymore. You know there is—what was open admissions a business practice that worked and now that we probably, if we wanted to, could decide to be selective. I think there's some who would argue well, let's do that. I mean if you think about it, Columbia today is the maverick much more so than in the 60s and what I mean by that is in the 60s, to be a college of opportunity was really in many ways sort of the fabric of higher education of that time. There were demands placed upon higher education to open up and you saw explosive growth and so Columbia in some ways, comfortably fit within that.

Now the political environment is hardly one that honors giving high school students a chance you know, in most cases, regardless of what they did in high school. It's not much sympathy for that attitude. So we're truly being a maverick now because we are in many ways swimming against the stream; to hold onto this particularly because there's reason to believe, you know I think it would be suicidal to do open admissions for many reasons, not just that it would tear apart who we are. But there's reason to believe well, we can be selective now. You know we are a—50% of our applicants for the fall are from outside the metropolitan area. There's bright lights on Columbia, brighter lights everyday and if you look at the history of higher educa-

tion I think there's some evidence that as colleges grow in stature, they seek to become then more selective which then fuels their stature and prestige. What I think is very encouraging is here we have a new President Warrick Carter who is saying we're not going to go down that path. You know we're going to continue to define our stature and our prestige, not on our selectivity, but on our commitment to urban education and taking raw talent and working with it and turning it into something.

Can you expand on, obviously you're committed personally to open admissions as well and you said that there were a variety of reasons beyond just your belief in it that it would be a bad choice for Columbia to do away with it.

Could you expand on that?

Well, if you take away open admissions, we no longer are who we are and I'll illustrate that. First of all, if you look at the diversity of our student body you know you can't divide open admissions from the issue of race, they're inseparable. I'm sure people would like to separate them but this is America and I don't believe you can. We did a study a couple of years ago and saw that—we looked at any private college that had an undergraduate arts and media group, student population of over 500 so NYU, I think Northwestern, DePaul, Rhode Island School of Design, Art Institute of Chicago, you know the list goes on. And I think there was in total, including Columbia, 33 colleges in that group. And Columbia had 45% of the total African American student enrollment for the 33 colleges.

If we take away open enrollment, which means you become selective and the nature of America and SAT or ACT scores or even any version of selectivity, we would see I'm convinced, a student population that would begin to look more like the Art Institute and Columbia then is no longer who it is. Because one of the things that I believe about Mike Alexandroff and the original creators of this is again, connecting to the urban environment to minority cultures, to African American music, to the effervescence of Latino culture that is all around us now. And that we can teach because that's a part of us everyday and you take away open admissions and that's gone.

You mentioned that is it over 50% is from outside the metropolitan area. So then does the mission become introducing these students, I mean if over half the population is no longer from within the city or I don't know what the—

Or the metropolitan area, yeah.

Right. So is that part of it as well, exposing them to that and the college being in the city helps that mission as well?

Yeah, you know somehow that's an incredible future, 50%. I'm guessing ten years ago it was 10%, maybe less. And you know these students are so attractive to Columbia, that they're coming and we can't accommodate them in a residence hall, we have 450 beds. These are students coming to go to Columbia and finding a place to live in the city. And you know it's not just hundreds, it's several hundred now or more than that even. It's hard to even give an accurate count of how many there might be. But—

But is that cause for concern at all?

Well, it's something to watch. It doesn't concern me as long as we keep focused on all the things we need to do and that we stay committed to that. For example our African American student population—what I think it means is that we have to do even more to hold onto the African American enrollment and not see that continuously shrink. I mean there is some evidence of it shrinking, it hasn't been dramatic. But we need to redouble our efforts to hold on to what we have and increase upon what we have coming from the metropolitan area.

I mean, basically you know, I believe if you're an African American student and you want to be in the arts, Columbia is your home. We have to do a better job of selling that; and for Latino students, for Asian students. We have a story to tell that no other arts college can really talk about with any honesty. I mean everyone is for diversity, right. Columbia, clearly in its mission and what it's done day to day for many, many years, a wildly diverse student body and by any definition is part of who we are. But you go right to Wabash today, hey it's 60 degrees out and it's April and you watch the—I just came over here and there was one student dressed up in a clown's outfit with a basketball net and I'm not sure what he was doing. There was another student with a horn and there was a couple of students you know in a circle rapping to each other and there was just this—there is this life that's on a sidewalk, it's not on a quad. And I'm trying to think well where, I'm sure maybe there are some other campuses, where you could find this, but you'd be hard pressed. It's still Columbia.

Last night we had a student life event. It's called the Big Mouth, I think that's the name of it and it was students and it ran from 6 to 10 and it was a lot of student talent. The emphasis was on hip-hop culture, dancing and music and poetry and you go in there and there's no faculty there, there's basically no staff; it's students. And it had as much sort of, I hate to use the word “underground” feel, but youth culture comfortably expressing themselves in the bowels of this college and bowel is the wrong word. But it's dark and I think you know well, where else would I find this? Would I find this at UIC, I don't think so. And it was a great scene, it was a Columbia scene.

What comes up repeatedly with this issue of commitment to open admissions and those that might say it's time for a change, but the questions comes up, if there wasn't Columbia and there wasn't open admissions, where would these students go to school?

They would die on the vine, there is nowhere else. And it fuels the creativity at Columbia. I'm convinced that the classrooms at Columbia are interesting. I try as much as possible to talk to faculty, particularly those part-timers who teach at other colleges and they more often than not say they love teaching at Columbia; when they compare it with the other campuses that they teach. And in some ways you think well, why because with the student body, with the number of students that would not even be considered college material somewhere else, the challenges that go with that and the frustrations that surely go with that, you would think that they would say hey, you know, I want to be teaching singing tapes or whatever. But

what I hear again and again oh, they love Columbia. They love the classroom here. There's something going on and I believe students still find us for that same reason now.

Then how does that influence, and I want to get up to student affairs as well, but just to revisit academic advising. How is academic advising different at Columbia than it would be at a more traditional neighborhood university or college in regard to not only what Columbia specializes in and why students come here, but also the range of students you're serving you know from those that aren't prepared for college and those that are well prepared?

Well, I think that goes back to the issue of practices underneath the mission and that they should be changing all the time. Part of open admissions was defined as staying out of the student's way, we would know nothing about them, they would show up, they would sort of pick their classes and we would just get out of their way. In the end, we've turned it on it's head. We now demand a lot from students as they enter because we believe its only responsible. It's going to cost them a lot of money, we want to make sure they're ready for it. So you know I hate to use something as pejorative as it was a matchbook application, but basically it was. You sign your name. We would even send away for the students transcripts which was unheard of in higher-ed as if the students are incapable of even that.

You know now we demand much like at any other college. You know you have to write an essay, submit letters of recommendation, you get your own transcripts, they have to be on file. We've created a summer

bridge program so that most at risk students based on their high school record. We're going to bring them into the college, but hey Joe, we know how you are now and we want to help you and we're going to put this in place and we'll make it mandatory for you, same thing with developmental education. In effect because there was no testing and we knew nothing about students, so we couldn't place them in any orderly way into developmental classes. You could argue there really wasn't developmental education at Columbia in any way that made sense.

Now, it's mandatory that students are tested. It's mandatory that they're placed in these classes. None of this is intended as a barrier, but to give them a leg up so that they have a fighting chance to be successful, to do what they've come here for, to graduate. So there's been a real shift—

We're much more intrusive, we demand more. We talk about shared responsibilities; here's what you need to do, here's what we need to do to make this work. For this fall, we're telling students it's mandatory for orientation. That would have been, I don't want to say sacrilegious but boy—

Was it a fear of appearing that they were judging the students by saying we want your transcripts, we want to know your—?

I think so, yeah.

Why?

There was all kinds of healthy reasons why we didn't want that before, but I think that's an example of the mission has stayed the same but we'll need to change again and again in terms of how we do things, to make that mission work.

And I was unaware that they write essays and they get letters of recommendation. And how is it made clear to them that these things—I mean it's obviously not for selection. Is open admissions here basically first come, first serve?

Um-hmm, what students need to do is to complete their file to be admitted.

To be admitted. And that's upfront and then that's what you use in the advising part of it?

Um-hmm.

What they need, that they're deficient in, what—and when did that get put into place?

Oh, that requirement has been going on for several years, several years.

Is there a point like you can say this was a turning point where things began to change?

You know, I think there were a couple of turning points. I think the one turning point was when we, the college decided that we were going to be serious about developmental education and provide enough resources within English and science and math to support it and that, then about a year or two later, that we were going to have mandatory assessment of incoming students. And well, this is incredibly foggy, but that's about six years ago when that started and maybe four years ago when we started the mandatory assessment or moved towards—you know it took some time to put it in place. But I would bet there is four, five or many years, before that of discussions within the college, before we got to that point.

Some of the new services that we put in place, you know we have this new freshman center. We're trying to—we want to know who the individual students are that are coming to us and make sense of who they are and what they need and what their concerns are.

Is this in part what you were referring to earlier in part response to improving retention that you want to keep them here?

Um-hmm. I mean one of the thrusts of the college, is we have historically very low graduation rates, even low graduation rates in comparison to other open admissions colleges and I think there's two interpretations of what that means. One is that's just the nature of the beast of Columbia, because of who we are in our curriculum and the students we attract. The other interpretation, which is one that I more subscribe to, is that we the college, need to do a better job of working with our students. We should aspire to become a model for urban education in college education. And so we need to overhaul our practices so that more of these students are successful. And we've been doing a lot of that and what's very encouraging, it's incremental, but graduation rates are without a shift in the student body. You know we don't have complete data on this, but there hasn't been as far as we can tell, any real shift in the high school grades or for those students where we have ACT scores—

You mean raising that, yeah.

—that hasn't changed much. But we started to see over time some dramatic increases in retention, which we think will start to play out in some significant gains in graduation rates. Already we've seen—we don't have to hide as

much, or we don't have to say well, here is our graduation rate. I think it's now for full time student freshmen going through the college I think it's up to 22% and I would expect we're going to start approach 30%. If we start approaching 35% graduation rate, we're doing something good. If we start going beyond that we can start trumpeting our horn saying Columbia knows how to work with students and turn them into something special.

And the students that other colleges would not have been considering.

Right, and again how could Columbia ever believe—does anyone believe that you can really say who has creative talent? I mean if you buy a garden or a series of multiple intelligences, intuitively I think it makes sense and he has some research to back it up. Who the hell believes that they, in any way, could measure the sum of the intelligences that would go into being an artist? Not with a capital A, of any sort. I mean, when I hear some of these students and I watch their use of language as they rap, there is intelligence at work; a high order of intelligence at work. I'm sure if we tested some of those students, it would say hey, this is not college material. We believe we can take that and turn—there's a potential of turning it into something.

In the end, as Mike Alexandroff said all along, I mean the bottom line is you have to become college educated. You can't change the rules so much that a Columbia education doesn't hold weight, but I believe we have more going here to inspire students to become intellectually engaged in most campuses. If a student is inspired

by one of these art forms, then boy we've got something that probably business students—I doubt many business students are passionate or by definition, how can you be very engaged in an undergraduate level? You sure can in our fields.

Well, and I also wonder how many administrators at other schools, not to place any judgment, would find value in that or would have noticed that and said that is something worthwhile or that is—?

We are still swimming against a stream and in fact more so than ever because in the 60s, at least there was a social movement that Columbia could feel a part of in some ways. I mean what we were doing fit into a larger context. We still fit into a larger context, but not in our values. I think we fit into the social context, so we continue to prosper because what we're teaching has become much more important in society. So we continue to get lucky because it's another—you don't have to be a starving artist anymore. You can come here and develop some of the skills that we helped develop and we have a chance of prospering much more than you could I think, 20 years ago. So we have different things working for us and against us.

Let's return to the evolution of your career here at Columbia. You talked about becoming director of academic advising. What did that evolve into and how long have you been with student affairs and you know what have you done there?

Well, it's a long and checkered history. I'll try to give you a thumbnail sketch. I then became, after about two years as Director of

Academic Advising, the Director of Counseling Services, which meant I was in charge of both academic advising and career planning and placement.

So they were two combined.

So there were two. They weren't combined but they were where a student would go for any sort of advice if it was academic or career or to a lesser extent, but we were the only place in the college where you tried to deal with it where there were some personal issues. And then became Associate Dean of Student Development and some of the other programs such as higher ground; some of the outreach programs, some of the programs to help students who needed some help and were seeking more help. We started to put together some programs for them. Then, I think, I became Associate Dean for Student Life and Development.

At one point, one of the things that drove me nuts about Columbia and this was just the nature of our facilities. Here we were in an arts and media college and students in almost every major, by definition, were doing something that was palpable and it seemed to me that it was important in the educational process for them to show what they were doing, for others to look at it; this whole issue of artist audience sort of thing and it was no place in Columbia where students could come together, where students could see what each other was doing. And I was pretty much the person responsible for the creation of the Hokin, which was the first place. I mean we had an actual campaign, I think it was the first election ever at Columbia. It was actually a referendum, where students voted whether they wanted to tax themselves—create a

small student activity fee that would support the Hokin and that this would be a place where students could exhibit work or read fiction or poetry, show films and so there was this big campaign.

And I remember being condemned by the student newspaper, claiming about Kelly's Crusaders and thinking this was some sort of administrator scam or something, but students wildly supported it and the Hokin came into being. I think one of my other concerns and contributions to the college is clearly we do a great job in the classroom. And from what I've heard of the good old days, there was a sense of community just by definition of the small size, everyone knew everyone but we were becoming this big, complex place. We were this urban, horizontal college and it was very difficult for students to connect to each other outside the classroom. And one of my great—particularly in open admissions, you know I firmly believe that students have to feel like they're a part of a community if we're going to inspire them to do the things we believe they're capable of. It can't be individual classroom experiences. It has to be something larger. And it's been one of my major concerns and hopefully one of my contributions to the college is to really help the college focus more on that and do the necessary things, so that there's a rich student life and we've come a long way in that area, but I'm digressing.

We'll come back to that.

I then became the Acting Dean of Students and I think I had a year and a half, I was Acting Dean of Students. I then became the Associate Provost of Planning

which sort of shocked me and maybe many other people when I assumed that responsibility, because it was not something that I was expecting or aspiring or necessarily knew what that was.

Who asked you to do that?
President John Duff.

Okay, and why do you think he asked you?

Because I think he saw that well, Columbia was growing and that there wasn't clarity of what the big picture was and how we were proceeding and where we were headed and he wanted a very robust institutional research department which reported to me, that was going to better explain what's going on in the college and more institutional planning so that we could say better, okay here is our mission. But underneath the mission, this is the direction we're taking it and why; here is our big goals.

And I don't know why he picked me because to be quite honest, I didn't even know what that field was. I mean maybe—I've shown a capacity to think along those lines, but it was trial by fire because I think everyone at the college said well, that sounds like a nice title. What the hell is it? I think I made good (*inaudible*) from it and just the fact when NCA came here two years ago one of the things it was noted was that the college seemed to have a sense of it itself. It had documents that spoke to that, it had research that backed that up, it was a great learning experience for me. And for the last six months, I've now assumed this position as the Vice President of Student Affairs.

And the planning, was that an initiative that was not present before?

Right, there had been an Institutional Research Office, but it was pretty much a one man operation and with Ann Foley assigned to report to me, it became an important administrative arm of the college.

And I mean part of its role was for the institution to redefine itself or define itself for the future?

Well, I'll tell you if you go back to issues like development, the planning process was I think very helpful in establishing some goals and then moving on them and I'll give you an example. The college re-committed itself to open admissions, but redefined—it wasn't enough just to accept students. We had to show that we can make good on the promise, that students in greater numbers would be retained and graduated and that therefore we had to overhaul practices to accomplish that which led to—

And it's not just planning, it's planning in the college itself, but the introduction of developmental education. All of these new attention initiatives, which came out of planning and then sort of a subplot was the retention committee that I chaired and all of the recommendations, many of which have actually been put into place so the new freshman center, the new overhaul of orientation, the providing resources to the department to create a sense of community for new students, the new student convocation, you know, let's the students get here. Let's inculcate them with our values. Let's create a sense of community. Let's inspire them to overcome the obstacles they're going to encounter.

And then that was all connected to planning which because then the question was well then how did you get back from student affairs. But in many ways planning set the stage for a lot of the new initiatives in student affairs. I mean basically what we've said, is we can no longer have immature systems supporting students outside of the classroom. It's not acceptable anymore. We have to have state of the art student services. Our new President said that he wants us to be the best student centered arts and media college in the world, which is a brilliant line because I think there are some who want to just be the best arts and media college in the world. What makes that work for me is the best student center.

And I mean expand on that, what that means to you.

Well, to me it connects us right back to the open admissions that we're not going to—best arts and media college in our culture is defined as how viciously selective you can be. Best student center, is how open and supportive you can be to the students who have aspirations in these areas and keeping that mix which by the way the students love. All the survey data—you know students tell us that they get Columbia in that they like this urban, wildly diverse place and this is wider here and we need to hold on to that.

But they also—you know they expect to be able to go on to a web page and communicate and make transactions that right now are pretty cumbersome at Columbia. They expect that there be a sense of community that's available to them. You know my gosh, they want to form sports teams and

things that seem so unconnected to Columbia, but that's what our students want and that's fine. So I think we have the first intercollegiate team in the college's history. Actually I heard it was a softball team in the 40s in one of our earlier incarnations, but it's our Frisbee team. I don't even know what they do out there, but they won a game.

But best student centered, arts and media college is a way of just I think, reaffirming our mission but it's no longer can we have immature systems. It's no longer can we have financial aid that doesn't respond quickly to students. No longer can we have a registration process that is a labyrinth and is bureaucratic and you know it feels like it was designed by a sadist.

And we're quickly moving away from that, but those things were in place and they were sort of okay in the old Columbia; they're not anymore.

I think also part of it is, and this is something that I think is typical in any college that, especially as we've grown and become complex that there were so many silos within Columbia. I mean even within the student affairs areas, we had gotten to the point where most offices did their thing and did not communicate with other offices. And you know there's no way in the end, that you're going to have effective services. And actually you know, this is not just pandering to the consumer taste.

One of the most disturbing things about what students tell us as they graduate, is they love their classroom experience, they love their teachers and somehow you can teach them the data, not just somehow, you can teach them the data and more than just teach them the

data they say it very directly. They don't feel connected to the institution. They don't trust the institution. They don't believe is committed to their welfare and that's tragic. Because here is this great place and then they're leaving us and they feel connected to individuals or maybe to a department, but not to something larger. These are students who are not going to come back, they're not going to give back to the institution. I'm not talking just (*inaudible*) about money, they're not going to be looking out for other Columbia students who are graduating. They're not going to be you know, when they get back in town or ten years later—

Visiting.

—visiting and we will suffer tremendously, if that's the case. We need to be at the point and I think this is basically one of my charges, it is my charge that when students graduate from here they believe not just their individual faculty care about them, but the institution and that they care deeply about the institution and that there will be that ongoing relationship based on that trust and that comfort. And we're not there yet, but that's where we have to be.

Tell me how do you see that happening then and I wanted to come back to this idea of student life and the creation of community. You made reference to it but can you give us some examples of what has been done, what's being done and what you'd like to see in the future? You know what are things that are running around in your head that you want to see come to Columbia?

Well, probably the bottom line in this is a new student center, a new

building, a signature building in its architecture, something that defines for the public and for all of us who we are. You know we're four, we have these wonderful buildings but we're adapting buildings designed for other uses. And if we could have a focal point for the college, that centers on the student experience, that it's a place where students you know—Imagine a place where films and art and performances and discussions are taking place, where we take all the palpable things students are doing and that are now pretty, they're much more present in the college, but we bring them all under one roof and all that energy and all that synergy that comes from that. We put that together, it would re-define the student experience.

Is that in the works? Is that a possibility?

Oh, it's in the works. You know we have that anonymous donation of the land where Buddy Guy was and we need to raise the funds to build this, but I hope we're going to be very ambitious in our plans and that is, you know we'll raise the money to do it because what we don't need to do is use tuition money; we can't. I mean one of the other, if we can get back to, is the issue of economics because I think that's one of the other threats of the college. But that's the kicker that's going to make a huge difference, but even before then what we're trying to do is be much more purposeful in creating opportunities for students to get involved. I mean quite honestly, to form a student group at Columbia was sort of a hard thing to do; a bit bureaucratic. We'll just throw those rules

out the window and make it easy and you know a hundred flowers balloon.

There should be hundreds of student organizations at Columbia. There's no student government. I mean there's a great irony in that. I think someone from afar would think, well, Columbia. You know this is a student centered place, surely student voices are heard. They haven't been, but I believe there will be student government up in the Fall. And as an administrator, I'll probably regret the day that it is formed but, I absolutely am committed to seeing it be formed because it's part of students believing that the institution cares about them—is that we're going to allow them to have their own voice and—

Before they leave.

Yeah. And a lot of them say whatever, they have to say good and bad, so those are just I think some small examples. You know, I'll give you another example. We have the inauguration of our new President and one of the things that occurred to me is well, if we're going to be student centered—the students can care less about an inaugural, you know the pomp and circumstance, the people in robes, they're not going to be here. What does this mean to them? And what we've decided to do, is that we're asking every department during May, when we evolve these end of the year events which now are all over campus, every department pick one and we're going to put together a schedule that the president can show up his many departments; see students, see student works, better connect in this big place—the president which is a position, very distant from the life of students to students.

And then we're going to have the inaugural street festival. And we have Common who is a very high profile rapper to young people. It's like Common is coming? It's going to be a free concert with competition for several student bands to be selected, in the parking lot next to the garage and the President will be there. And what other place would there be an inaugural without a bona fide rap artist, that's going to have the President part in an inaugural? But it fits Columbia to a T. And actually Common went here and took three courses. So he was just nominated for a Grammy. So you know and he truly has some stature and the New York Times just wrote about him, that you know here is an example of a rapper where there's a lyricism, there's a lyrical nature to what he talks about and says.

But I mean we need that same, almost street energy that Columbia was so proud of in the 60s. We need to recreate as a college of 9,000 students and I'm not sure how we do it. Obviously a student center of the arts and media would be part of it, but there is a million other ways. I mean what's the street theater group they put on the Halloween extravaganza? I'm just drawing a blank. It's sort of a new millennium version of street theater, but—and many people from Columbia are associated with them in different ways. This is something we need to bring down at Columbia. We need to make sure that this area does not become totally occupied where the professionals in the area determine the character. We have to make sure that this becomes still more Bohemian in nature, more student like and they just rub shoulders with us but they don't overrun us.

I want to make sure if you could because I think we just have a few minutes left, but you mentioned the economics are not a threat to the college. And if you could just—

Well, and it's not the economics of the college per se and our budgets, it's the economics of our students. If you went to Columbia 15 years ago and you had a full Pell and state grant it would pay for your tuition and put money in your pocket for lunch and transportation. Now the gap is about \$5,000, so the greatest threat is that we've become unaffordable, in that even though we stay within our mission—economics that we don't have much control over. Because no surprise, Pell grants fall further and further behind because there isn't a commitment to access and opportunity.

Students will fall several hundred more dollars behind and that will threaten the minority enrollment. That just threatens the college in general because well, we're open admissions but as we become relatively expensive it will inevitably have a tremendous impact on the character of the student body; on the accessibility. There's just no magic bullet that's going to address that. Surely our trustees have to come to grips with that, because unless we start having some capital campaigns that raise some funds—

Where Columbia would provide the scholarships.

Right, but we can't be naïve enough to believe that we'd ever be able to cover that gap. I mean if we have a hundred million-dollar donation tomorrow it wouldn't cover the gap. So it's a real concern.

Okay, now I know that we're at the last breath of this tape.

