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Interview with John Mulvany, 1998

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John Mulvany

It's March 3rd, 1998 and this is an interview with John Mulvany, who is the Chairperson of Art and Design and the Chairperson of Photography.

OK, let's start with...

I'm also the chairperson, or the governor, the Chairman of the Governing Board of the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

And that's housed here at Columbia?

Yeah.

OK, great. When did you come to Columbia and what were the circumstances that brought you here, or was there an individual that brought you here?

I came in 1974 and they were interviewing for a chairman of the Department of Photography at the time. And I had just returned from teaching in England at Trent... So I interviewed for the job and I got it. What's unusual about that is that the only place I didn't want to live, in the world, was the Midwest, and it's the place I end up... So I came, you know, just to interview for chair. I worked the academic year '74-'75, which was the first accreditation, the first tenure accreditation. My wife was pregnant at the time, which was kind of a surprise to us, and we just had a little girl who was a year old and then there was... and I was offered another job as the Director of the School Board at Illinois Wesleyan, and so at the beginning of the academic year I left and then came here from Wesleyan. And then seven years later in 1978 both the Photography Department and the Art Department, they each needed a chairperson. And so I spoke to

Mike Alexandroff and I said that I would be interested in coming back to Columbia College but as chairmen of both of those departments. And he said, "OK," basically, and so I was chairman of both of those departments. Now in 1974 and 1975 I also started what is now the Museum of Contemporary Photography. And when I got back in 1978 I continued on as the responsible College officer for that, and I fired all of the directors of the Museum, and set the goal for getting American Association of Museum accreditation.

Is that something you were ever going to take with you to Wesleyan, or did it— Which?

The Museum of Contemporary Photography.

No, no.

OK. Yeah. But did someone take over for you in the interim?

Someone took over in the interim, yes. There was another chairman of this department, and there was a chairman of the Art Department. The Art Department at that time was rather small. The Photography Department was well staffed, but the Art Department was not, and Mike was very keen on having a viable Art Department. And at that time, there was some idea that it would be devoted to ethnic art. So when I took over, I, you know, I really, like, jettisoned that idea, and set a track for the professional arts, graphic design, advertising, etc., and the area included [period] design, fashion design, product design, and we started this [full-on] graduate program. And there was a vacuum in the city for this kind of study, and so very quickly the Art

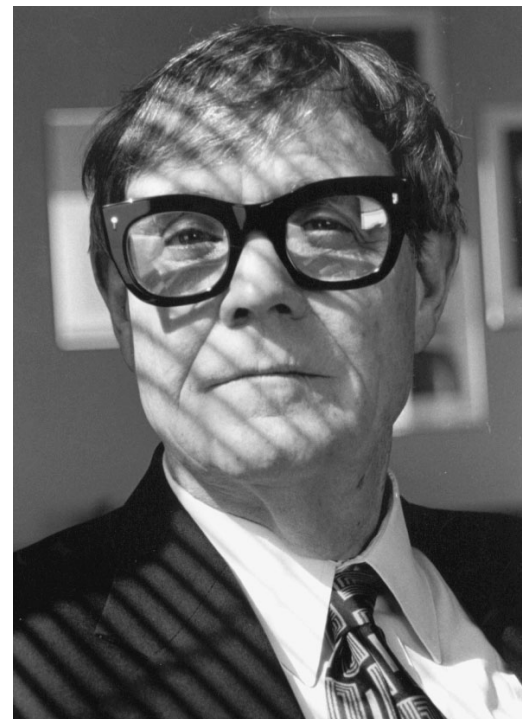
Department went from a very slow department to the largest department in the College.

What has that meant for you, if you, you know, initially, you're chair of these two departments with, you know, asked to build up the one, and then as it grew... I mean, it seems quite unusual, it seemed like a large plate to have these two departments and somehow it started—

Well, I had a lot of energy, and I didn't want to be pigeonholed into being just a photography person. That's part of the reason I left, in addition to a brand new baby, and I wanted, you know, more of a scope of the arts in general. But I loved Columbia, I loved being in the city, I loved the mission of Columbia...

Could you describe what that mission is, through your eyes?

Well, what I liked about Columbia, and what I identified with being first generation, and that describes my background. My mother and father came from Ireland, and I was



the first person to go to college. And I have this very strong belief in education as a way up, of social mobility. And so this really appealed to me, because it was—that was the whole point of this place, that it was a first generation college that offered upward mobility. That's the best that democracy can offer.

Can you describe the atmosphere, perhaps, that you found here, what the College was like in the—

Well, the atmosphere was very different at that time. The majority of the students were much older than the students today. Now they tend to be right out of high school. So these were older students, and they might not have done well, you know, or been motivated, but they'd been out of high school for a year, and went in kind of dead-end jobs, or boring jobs, and really wanted to put a life together, and so this was a tremendous opportunity for them. And that was basically what Columbia College was. Over the years, they had then started to focus and market itself to younger, four-year, full-time students, and so the character of the College has, since then, 1974, changed dramatically. We've become—we now have a traditional college age group. And they're a different group. And in an open admissions environment, many of those younger, right out of high school people tend to be high risk. They're not very well motivated, and so the revolving students has gotten large, and we've just about lost the continuing education people, the older people.

That was my next question: How do you explain that shift or movement away from the older, non-traditional student?

It was our intention, to go after

recent high school graduates who are traditional age.

So that was part of the long-term goal.

I think it became a goal maybe around the 1980s. You know, the College in success far surpassed any expectations. There was no idea back in 1974, when we were on Ohio Street in rented quarters, that this would become, you know, a place with a 60 million dollar budget at some time, and over 9,000 students. That was never planned for if you would have—I mean, he could never have projected that without sounding like a nut. Because this was also a time of declining college enrollments. The baby boom was over, and colleges over built, and then when the baby boom came to an end, enrollments declined nationwide, so Columbia is definitely against the prevailing trends of education, in terms of a growing student body. So nobody could have projected the amount of success that the College has had, which shows that that success is based on the fact that we filled a void. And that's been the great strength of Columbia College, filling the void. And I think that the Art Department is an excellent example of that. This is a major, world city. It has a huge print and design industry. There are no colleges with strong professional programs in design. Columbia College had the flexibility that, overnight, we could just say, "We're gonna do that." And Mike Alexandroff's genius was that he looked for entrepreneurial people, action-oriented people, who would, you know, act quickly. And he gave tremendous support for doing that. He allowed me to define what the nature of the Art Department would be, and he gave

the support necessary to create that. And so what might take years, what you might never be able to accomplish in a college with a long history, we could accomplish in a couple of years here.

That sounds like an incredible opportunity, particularly if you're—

Yeah, it is. Very few people get that opportunity in their career to create something. Most department chairs take over something, but it's a special gift to be given the opportunity to create something that wasn't there.

Did Mike Alexandroff hire you, is that who you interviewed with?
Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Describe, maybe, that process. Or did you know what you were getting into?

Well, remember, I was here for a year as chairman of the Photography Department.

Oh, I see. Yeah.

So I'm probably the only person in the College who's working and chose to work here knowing what it was like. The interview—I mean, Mike was a fairly direct guy. And we knew each other from before. And, you know, when I started, I went in to his office to talk to him, and he told me directly, he said, "John, I don't care if you ever teach a course. I just want you to run the Art Department." And that was our contract. He never told me—he was kind of put off by what I did, because Mike had this, you know, this very romantic vision that we'd all be engaged in ethnic arts, and all these crazy courses—Mexican Saddle Stitchery, Birdhouse Construction, Wayside Cross Building. You know, all these nutty kinds of things that were going nowhere, because they were based

in some kind of romantic notion Mike had about proletarians making art. What was really needed in this city was a great, professional art department. And so he wasn't happy, but he never, never even asked me a question. Because I jettisoned that whole thing immediately. The first day I was here. I just dropped it, you know, and he was very disappointed. But he was very happy with the result, because he got an Art Department, you know. An Art Department is a lifetime gift to the College.

Did you teach?

Yeah, I still teach.

Oh, OK.

I always taught.

Describe that a little bit, maybe your kind of philosophy of education, how that may have changed, or what you did in the classroom, what was available when you first came to—

Well, my philosophy—one of the reasons that I liked Columbia so much is that I believe education in America was not founded for a leisure class. It was always tied to pragmatic ends. And I really strongly believe that one's economic aspirations are equal to one's spiritual aspirations. You can't have a spiritual life without an economic life. You're too hungry. And most colleges concentrated on the more spiritual aspects of an education, you know, the education for the self, knowing for itself. Which I think is very important, but I think in doing that, they cut short the idea of economic aspirations. And so my philosophy was to honor those economic aspirations, to use education to prepare people to gain upward mobility, to go out into the world and through their labor have a satisfactory life. I really believed it, and I still do. And

Columbia was very, very open to that use of education, and I hope it will continue to be so.

Has it got more difficult, are there greater challenges, or...

What have been some of the various changes made that you've seen?

Well, I think moving to a more traditional age for our student population, you start to mirror more traditional colleges, you know? When I came to Columbia College, the requirements for graduation were 124 credit hours. 48 of them were in Liberal Studies, with no requirements, that you could take anything you want. And 76 hours in anything you wanted also. Well, if you go and read the catalog now, people are required to take certain things. We were really, in the early '70s, we were avant garde, or an alternative to other colleges. The irony is, is that we very quickly, in the 1980s, then turned around and started running backwards towards the 1950s and the 1940s. And all the other colleges, then, adopted what we were doing then, and have passed us up. I think that, you know, most other colleges in the United States have far, far more advanced curriculums than Columbia now. The required part of the curriculum.

Mm-hmm.

And we've become very old fashioned, stultified. We lock students into courses without really honoring what their desires are. And that's what we used to do. The philosophy of the curriculum was that students were the best experts in tailoring an education to their needs. And so there was very little in loco parentis. And that's all turned around now. Every year, we keep on adding more of what they must take, and students have very

little control over their education at Columbia now, where at most other colleges, the control students have had over their education has increased dramatically. Both my daughters went to colleges where they had 100 percent control over what they studied. Here, it becomes less and less control.

And is that related to the lowering age and the makeup of the student population, or how would you explain that trend as well?

Well, it's hard to explain. I think it has to do with changing your student body. We're getting younger and younger students, and so in loco parentis becomes more and more—we start to adopt that role, students must have this, students must have that, so we, instead of saying the student is in charge of their curriculum, we take on the role of "No, this is good for you." And it's very much like the parents who insist upon buying really interesting-looking wooden toys for their kids at Christmas when the children really want plastic toys. It's the parents who want the wooden toys, and the kids never play with them. So I think we ought to look at that very carefully. Back to the idea that why shouldn't the student have some say in their own education, it's a basic lack of confidence in students. So the College is really, I would say from 1974 to 1988, an entirely different environment.

Has it been difficult? Maybe what I want to ask is, why have you stayed? Was that transition difficult for you, or do you remain optimistic?

No, it's imperceptible. It's like growing old. You don't wake up one morning and you're old, you do it day by day by day by day, and then you look and say, "God, I'm old! What happened to the young

guy?" So, no, it hasn't been difficult. And you stay in a job—people have such weird ideas—you stay in a job because you have a mortgage. I mean, if I hated the job, it's not so easy to leave. I still like it, and I still find it challenging, and I think that there's still valuable things we can do. I love the fact that, you know, that's an opportunity to create a great faculty, it's a tremendous opportunity. And I think that Columbia College as a whole has probably one of the best faculties in America. Because of our location and our mission. So I think that there's still a big role for me. I think now that we really need to start looking to the past. Add some guidance. And try to get back to some original ideas. Now—when you're a maverick or a cowboy at one time, now much of what we do is to please other people, particularly accreditation. So you're not master of your own ship anymore. Lots of what you do—"Oh, you've gotta do this," which I think this is what the North Central wants. In 1974, we were trying to get accreditation, but we were seeking accreditation based on our differentness, based on our going against the grain. Now we're seeking it to be to blend in with everybody else. And I don't think we do a good job.

That point was made in another interview, and I thought that was interesting that they pointed out that Columbia got its accreditation as this alternative.

Right. People came—I remember that whole accreditation process, because people came—[they came in] with a very doubtful view of the place. They were enchanted by it, they thought it was great. At the time they thought that this would be a good place for their own kids. Now, they'll come and they'll see, you know, a b-flat college. I think

the departments are still viable, but all of the trappings have gotten b-flat.

So do you think—and I'm getting ahead of myself—but for the future of the College, are you hopeful that it—and do you want it to become, have a renaissance of being an alternative institution of higher education?

Well, I would like it to have a renaissance. *(Laughs)* I would like—I think the College needs to question itself. I think it's going on too many unquestioned assumptions. And a lot of them are from the past, but the world has changed. And one of the things that I find disappointing in Columbia, that there is no theoretical thinking in the College about the College, and about the College as it relates to society, as it relates to industry, as it relates to this city.

In the mission statement, and I think as many as I have seen and read, that you know, they talk about the commitment to open admissions. How has the definition of that changed in your tenure?

How has it changed? Dramatically. Open admissions... [What] I think of Columbia College. In 1974, there were more people that wanted to go to college than there were seats in colleges. And to get into the arts, you had to have a portfolio. Or you had to have experience in dance or theater in high school. You also had to have a good grade point average. If you overcame many barriers, you could be there. And to things like film and television, nobody had majors in those then. So Columbia's open admissions, one of the components of it that we've totally forgotten, is that you didn't need a portfolio, you

didn't need prior experience in the arts. That component has been forgotten, because we don't get older people anymore, we get all young people. So open admissions has just come to mean "If you failed everywhere else, you can get in." And we're taking in too many people. So I believe that open admissions has become unlimited admissions. That higher education has simply become longer education. And that then through grade inflation, we use grades as a way of retaining students. We give them good grades. If you look at the Compass test scores of our students this fall, you'll see large numbers of them are below eighth grade in reading, math, and writing, a large number below sixth grade. And yet, the most frequently given grade in Columbia, I think, is an A. So go figure that one. How are people at sixth grade, seventh grade level getting As for supposed college level work? What has happened, I think, is that the chief beneficiary to the College became faculty and they stay. People who work here and pay their mortgage. I don't think... I think that open admissions needs—open admissions for 30 year olds, 35 year olds, that's one thing, because they're coming in with life experience and work experience. It's a lot different than a 17 year old or an 18 year old student who's just blown off high school. And that's what we're getting, and that's [where we're an open admissions school.] And I think that that should be closed. I think we really need a more responsible admissions policy.

Who are some of the people that you remember best? Students, faculty, administrators, staff? Particularly in the earlier years that you were here, and why they were.

Oh, Harry Bouras was, you know, a

great entrepreneur, raconteur, bulldog, radio artist. He was a wonderful guy.

And was he on your faculty here in the Art Department?

Well, he was... he was in Liberal Ed, in the Art Department for a while. He used to have a radio program on WFMT. Harry was a very important part of Chicago. He was a great artist himself, a child prodigy. Went to the University of Chicago when he was 15, something like that. A notorious drinker and womanizer. He was probably one of the greatest characters at Columbia. You know, and Jake. Jake was our chief—I don't know, janitor, custodian, working guy, carpenter. He was a wonderful guy from Europe. He and the President were very close friends. Jake came here after the Second World War. I mean, it was the kind of place where the president and the chief janitor could be close buddies, and have intellectual conversations with [each other]. And, of course, Mike had a tremendous influence. He loved entrepreneurship. He loved daring people, people with big ideas. He'd never get in the way, never allow his ego to be threatened by somebody else's accomplishments. So he was the ideal kind of boss, one who revels in the accomplishments of his subordinates. And there's not a lot of those. Most bosses are threatened by any subordinate who's talented. They're always afraid that person will take their job.

Um, could there have been an heir to Alexandroff? It seems like perhaps, you know, from what I've heard, he might have been one of a kind, and the current administration, you know, for better or for worse, is not in that vein. Or do you think that

Columbia came to kind of its fruition, that late '60s or '70s, that that was a special moment in time an he was the guy, and— I think it was a special moment in time and he was the right guy. Mike's genius was that in the '60s you had social revolution. There were more people who wanted to go to college than there were seats in colleges, and there were obstacles. He eliminated the obstacles. So people who could not have gone to college now went to college. It was also the time of the Great Society, and lots of money went to poorer people to go to college. If Mike had this idea in the 1950s, it would have gone [downhill]. It wouldn't go anywhere today, because 50 percent of the colleges and universities in America now have liberal admissions policies, which are they accept over 90 percent of their applicants. So it was a particular time and a particular genius to see that time and to seize that moment. And he made a tremendous contribution to Chicago, and afforded a lot of young people the opportunity to go to college that wouldn't have gotten it otherwise, and I think it was very much a part of the continuity of the history of education in America, which has been one of ever-expanding democratic access to higher education.

Could you expand that a bit, Columbia's impact or its relationship to higher education in America at that time?

Well, I mean, you have to—as I said, it's a part of a continuum, so you can't be seeing just that one time. I think that, you know, the land grant colleges right after the Civil War was to—a new nation needed educated people, and so the land grant colleges were developed. The GI Bill, then, was expanded opportunity. More people could go

to college, and then the third great democratic expansion in American education was the Great Society, and Columbia College fit into that part of the Great Society, and we were in the forefront—

Can you think of—are there areas today that Columbia remains at the forefront, or—I know you've talked about already about how it's gotten more conservative and, you know, we seem to be looking backwards in some respects as opposed to—

No, we're not in the forefront anymore. I think we're a pretty conservative college, one that looks more like the 1950s than the end of the century. I think we have excellent departments, I think we [have good] curriculum, good capital facilities... I think we have too many people to serve. There are far too many students, and that's how we're using open admissions, as an excuse. "Oh, we can't turn anybody down, that wouldn't be open admissions." A lifeboat is open admissions, but when the lifeboat is full, there's no point in letting more people in and have the lifeboat sink. That's not open admissions. That's self-serving, and my theory is that our open admissions policy has become a self-serving policy, to take in more people than we can handle.

And self-serving—do you also mean financially self-serving as well?

Yeah. It's our income. And if they fail out quickly, that means they fail out before we've had a large investment in them. I mean, if we increased our retention in any year by 20 percent, the place would fall apart. We don't have the resources. So in a peculiar way, it's to our advantage to see them come and go on that revolving door policy. Now,

there's no malintent, this has happened at colleges all over the United States. I think we just reflect that trend, and so I don't think [there are] culprits or anything. You know, you become more [codified] by your own self-interest, and it would be very hard to say, you know, "Let's stop doing that." And also, we have the nobility of open admissions as our cover.

Even though that has shifted in its purpose.

Yes, and even though it's damaging. If I had a son or daughter who just blew off high school, I simply would not send them to a place that was gonna cost \$10,000 a year. Any parent would say, "No. You go to X junior college and get your grades up, and prove to me that you're serious about this, and then we'll see." Well, why aren't we counseling people the way we counsel our own children? Anybody who wants to know how to counsel students just has to go by one rule: Pretend it's your own child and you'll never give them bad advice. So I know we're giving people bad advice by saying "Come on in" when they've just, you know, blown off high school.

Hmm.

So what happens then, as you over-enroll, you get a high percentage of at-risk students. And then you say, "My God! They're all at risk. We'd better have remediation." So you de-center content in favor of remediation. And you're trying to catch up for what they didn't get in grade school, middle school, and high school. And your failure is gonna be just as large as it was in those other [parts] that you're devoting your energies to, and I think that that's a critical mistake and misstep that Columbia has made in the past few years.

That diverts an awful lot of energies as—

It takes off your focus. Then, you see, when that becomes your focus, you know, then you start talking about all this other feel-good stuff. [Esteemed] learning communities and styles of learning, but you never hear anymore at Columbia, there's never a discussion of quality and excellence. It's all about pedagogy now and how to retain students. And that might sound good, but ask yourself this question: How much of a college education should be college work? And I'd say 100 percent. Remediation's not college learning. It's trying to get people ready for college. Well, if we spend our time doing that, when are they gonna get this college education?

That vicious cycle of—you accepted this person, so you have an obligation, but then—

Right. Don't accept high-risk students who have just blown off high school. Accept 30 year old people, 35 year old people who might have blown off high school, but now have enough experience to say, "I really messed up, I've got one more chance, and I'm gonna really make something out of it." Those people are also paying their own way. Well, a lot of our students are paying their own way, too. You have to realize these—the kids who I'm describing, the high-risk kids, a lot of them don't last here more than two weeks, three weeks, four weeks. They leave here then before the first paper, or the first midterm. They've borrowed money to come, so they owe that money, so maybe for eight weeks, six weeks, now they owe a lot of money at 8 1/2 percent interest, and they've had yet one more bitter failure in life. You know, responsi-

ble people don't do that.

On a more positive note (laughs), what are some of your favorite memories of, you know, events, or, again, people, during your tenure here at Columbia? Things that you look back to that may have been some sort of watershed, or just—

I think the accreditation [that came along] in 1975, and then in '85. It's been really—what a validation after all. I mean, Columbia was so against the grain, it was a validation that we were doing something new and good and right. The graduation ceremony. There used to be a spirit among the faculty that, you know, that we were doing something different. I don't know, you know, any—all golden ages really turn out be ages of lead. So I mean, you know, remembering—asking people about the times gone by [can be dangerous]. You know, it's become so large that, you know, there's not a sense of... of everybody pulling together. I think that the faculties have different views of what this college is all about. There's a division between Liberal Education faculty and professional faculty about what the purpose of it is. So the saga of Columbia has not really been adequately transmitted.

No, you've touched on many themes that, you know, come up again and again. The issue of size... another thing that maybe you might speak to is—that is a current issue, certainly, but the ratio of full-time faculty to part-time faculty and then the ratio of full-time faculty to student, the numbers of students. Has that... it's obviously changed over the years, but how has that influenced your departments? Or how have you had to accommodate that?

Well, you have to hire an awful lot

of people. I remember, two years ago on August 1st, I had 78 classes to fill with faculty.

That had not been assigned.

That had not been assigned. There wasn't enough people for them. I remember interviewing until I had lost my voice. I actually lost my voice. And then, you know, you have such a turnover of part-time faculty that, you know, often you've got maybe 20 percent every semester of brand new people. You don't know how they're gonna be in the classroom. And then if you have a jump in enrollment, you don't know that until the last minute, so, I mean, more than once—I remember, many years ago, hiring 30 part-time people over the weekend, for Monday before classes, on the telephone. So that you don't know these people, you don't know what you're getting the students into. You're lucky most of the time, you get real good faculty.

Unfortunately, the part-time faculty, unless they're people who set out to have academic careers, and didn't, because there are too many people in that area—well, those people know academic life, and can fit in easily. But it's the professional people, who never planned to do this, they don't understand academic life, and they often don't make—they're wonderful professionals, but they're not—they're not so good in the ancillary areas of being a faculty member, in advising, and knowing the system, in [coping]. So a student can have, you know, a whole schedule made up of part-time faculty members. This is not so good, from a counseling point of view.

That could be gone the next semester.

That could be gone the next semester, yeah.

If you—not that it would be eliminated, but just in your fantasy, if you didn't have to devote so much time to that hiring, like that semester you had to hire 78 people August 1st before the start of the Fall semester—what would you be devoting your time to? I mean, what do you have to neglect, I guess?

Well, I didn't have to neglect that—anything, but what you can't do—a faculty is a kind of organic thing. A faculty is developed, and you're working with [feeling], you've gotta have time to work with them to really create something. And with such a large number of part-time people, it's hard to do that. Now, the full-time people, you can, but they're not enough to cover that number of classes. I think maybe under 20 percent of the classes in Art and Design are taught by full-time people. And part-time people—remember, we worked three shifts, the morning shift, the afternoon, and the evening shift. I mean, I still interview every single person who teaches in Columbia. And every staff person as well. But after I interview them, I don't remember their name. I've got, you know, over a hundred people in Art alone. If I found one of them standing on my front door in the morning I wouldn't know who it was. So the evaluation, training evaluation, is not possible. So training and evaluation, turnover, you're constant—you never can shape the faculty.

Mm-hmm.

And so that is difficult.

Developing the—

Yeah, taking that group of people and making a faculty out of them. Strengthening the department, enhancing the quality of education.

What would be—would that be one of—or where do you think—what do you think the institution's priority is today, and what would you, you know, change tomorrow if you were king and could? And I guess the question is assuming that those are two different—

I would drop the enrollment to 6,500 students and I'd increase the tuition to support, keep the College going with 6,500 students, [and I wouldn't go over that limit], and I'd put in a responsible open admissions policy. If you're gonna get more people to graduate, you've gotta get more people who can graduate. So my criteria for open admissions would—well, the only caveat I would have for open admissions would be, in looking at this person's record, their age, all the other variables, do I honestly think the person could benefit from what we have to offer? If this was my kid, what would I think? And I'd seek to—I'd try to get more people to graduate. I'd work on the curriculum, the faculty, the capital... but when you have no limits to what your size is gonna be, how can you have a plan? And how would you ever know when you've got enough? So no organization out in the world says, "We don't know what size we're gonna be." You just can't plan, so—you know, if you have an increase of 10 percent students, well, you haven't planned for that. You don't have enough of anything.

OK. So do you think that—I mean, maybe that—is that still part of the fallout of this kind of unplanned success—
Yeah, yeah.

—and that, you know, we're catching up with change, or...
Yeah. We never said, "What are we going to be? You know, what do we

want to be?" And now, not only do we not ask the question, we're moving away from what we want. We're moving away from this emphasis on the disciplines to more and more responsibility for remediation. So we're gonna eventually become a college that—we already have. I mean, most of our concern is retaining students now. Now, in 1974, it was much more Jeffersonian. Everybody got a chance. But you had to save your own soul. You know, you had to achieve. It was your motivation that would allow you to accomplish. We didn't take the responsibility. We offered people tutoring opportunity, but we're way beyond that now.

You mentioned earlier in the interview that you were the first generation to go to college. Your parents—did they immigrate to the United States?

Yeah. From Ireland.

Can you just spend a little bit of time telling me more about your background, you know, before you came to Columbia?

Well, I lived in New York, I was brought up in New York, and I left high school to join the Army. When I got out of the Army I was a truck driver, and then when I was 25 I decided that I'd go to college. Driving a truck didn't seem very interesting. And I went to college. You know, kids growing up where I grew up, in the neighborhood I grew up, were not really expected to go to college. You looked—the height of ambition among Irish people was to get a job with a pension. Preferably a civil service job.

In a uniform.

Yeah. And I remember I had this big falling-out with my father, he wanted me to be an elevator opera-

tor. And that's when I went in the Army. Even I didn't want to be an elevator operator, but it was a job with a pension. And he'd fixed it, you know, he'd made this arrangement. I was gonna take this job as an elevator operator. I didn't see myself as an elevator operator.

What made you—now, you said as a truck driver, you decided that wasn't—but what put the spark of higher education, or what made you think that, you know, that you could do that, if all your friends hadn't done it, and your parents, and that wasn't—

Well, I don't know. I mean, I loved ideas, and loved reading, and I realized that there was a complete incoherence to my knowledge. I couldn't—like, I could read a book and I could memorize things, but I couldn't relate anything to anything. I remember, I was very interested in the Egyptians, and I would go to the library and read books on the Egyptians, but it was—I could remember the facts, but it was meaningless to me. And I realized that I couldn't relate it to anything. And then I realized "Well, I can't relate it to anything because I don't have a good education." And to get a good education, you had to practice, and so I went to school. And so really, I was like a lot of the young kids that we take in here. I had blown off high school, you know.

You were 24, you had tried a few careers, you know...

Well, yeah, 25, I had been in the Army and I had been driving a truck for five years. And so the immaturity that I had as a high school student was mitigated by experience, you know. And then going to college was a really valuable experience. If I had gone to

college—[one, I couldn't have gotten in], and had I gotten in, I would have been out by the Christmas recess. I mean, I see myself in so many of these students. Except now they're in college, where I was in the Army.

What about the direction of going into the arts? That couldn't have been typical of your background, or—

No, that was a lot later. I went, I majored in literature.

OK.

And when I graduated.. well, prior to that, when I got out of the Army, I met this really interesting guy, and he had a Ph.D., and he used to always talk about Greenwich Village. And so I took the train into Greenwich Village one afternoon, I came up out of the subway, and it was on the West Fourth Street station, and right in front of the Waverly Theater, which is still there. And it was like an epiphany, you know, I was going "Well, whatever this is, this is where I wanna be." And then when I went to college, I majored in literature, when I got out, I was walking on 157th Street, and I passed this camera store, and I just went in and I bought a camera. And that's what I wanted to be, a photographer.

What'd your dad say then? Was he still—

He thought I was crazy. My father never believed that I was a respectable person until—when I was the director of the School of Art, he was ill, and he came to live with me, and it was the centenary of the United States, the Bicentennial of the United States, and the telephone company had asked me to select a cover for the telephone book that year, and I did. I won this competition. So it had

my name, you know, “Cover selected by John Mulvany,” and my father happened to be looking through the telephone book, and he saw that, and that changed him entirely. He thought it was wonderful, because my name was on the telephone book, as selector of the cover. He was knocked out by it.

And the telephone book went to every resident—

So I finally, before my father’s death, proved myself as a respectable person. Yeah, after not taking that elevator job, he thought that there was absolutely no hope. *(Laughs)*

So you had a real—you said you see yourself in the students today, but also when you came here, you must have really had a real connection, particularly to perhaps the more mature student, who didn’t have access, you know...

Yeah, well, and I still do. I mean, there’s a lot of people who come in with their parents, and their parents are very worried about, you know, a major in art, and they know they haven’t done well, and so I feel that I’ve been able to give comfort to a lot of parents, who then are more supportive of their children, by telling them my own background. And it does comfort them, you know. I’ve told a lot of people that I left high school, and I had not done well... and also that art is a very worthy profession, probably one of the largest professions in the world. You know, there are tens of thousands of different jobs in the—parents tend to think that, you know, they have their Van Gogh [copy at home], or their kid’s gonna cut their ear off or something. And, of course, parents, I don’t know if you’re a parent—

No.

But we always want to make our children safe. We don’t want them to take risks. But they’ve gotta take risks. I’ve told lots of parents “If you’re worried about what your son or daughter is gonna be, get him a job as a bag boy in the Jewel, you’ll know exactly what they’ll be doing 20 years from now.” You know, and that makes a point. How much risk is there in wanting to be an artist, or a movie maker? But, you know, they’re like my father, they want them to be elevator operators. Teachers.

OK. Well, I guess the last thing—we’re running out, but if you just have another moment, that—and you’ve touched on this a lot, but what do you see in Columbia’s future, maybe on the more hopeful or the pessimistic side? You know, where are we headed? Well, I think it has to re-evaluate itself, and certainly go—

Do you see any seeds that that might be on the horizon? No.

No.

And I think that the growth is impossible to sustain. Eventually—as you grow, you’ve got to spend money on buildings, and eventually you will not be able to raise tuition equal to what you get service and equipment. At some point, this College has to stop, has to evaluate itself, and say, “What do we want to be?” And we’re not there yet. And we’re going off track. So—

Was that an expectation of the new administration, do you think? Well, I was on the search committee for the new president. Yeah, I think when Mike Alexandroff left, Columbia was at the apogee of what it could be in that set of circumstances. And that it was—at the time, I thought we stood on the

threshold of becoming one of the best inner-city colleges in America in visual and performing and broadcast arts. That was our great asset. And I think it slipped through our fingers. So I think we’ve gotta back up to that time.

OK. This hasn’t gone off yet, so I—one question that I wanted to come back to and didn’t, but if you could comment briefly on the Museum of Contemporary Photography, and what that’s become, and what your hope, you know...

Well, the Museum of Contemporary Photography is a resource for students within the College, and it’s part of an outreach program, it’s a gift to the community, and a gift to America or anybody else who wants to come there. Its focus is on American photography from 1959 to the ever present, and it examines all areas of photography. It’s accredited by the American Association of Museums, it’s a jewel in Columbia. There’s only two museums in America exclusively devoted to photography and who have accreditation from the American Association of Museums. The International Center for Concerned Photography in New York, and [Tony’s] room downstairs. It’s a tremendous resource, and it is a tremendous gift. People have come in from all over the world to see our collection. If you want to know about American photography, modern American photography, we have one of the best collections in the world. And it’s used constantly by museums all over the world, so it’s... it’s been a great accomplishment. I think that the present director of the Museum has brought it to that point.

And that person’s name is? Denise Miller.

And that also is a place—I mean, there's frequently exhibitions as well, and—

Oh, students—no, there are no student exhibitions.

Oh, it doesn't?

No, it's a professional museum, they won't accredit a student museum.

But they're—OK.

But it's a resource for students, if you want to study photography. Student shows are in the Hokin.

Right. That's what I'm thinking of, the photography displays in the Hokin. All right, well, great, thank you very much for being so forthright.

That was the unvarnished truth.