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### Interview with Steven Russell-Thomas, 2001

Columbia College Chicago

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## Steven Russell Thomas

*It is April 12, 2001. This is an interview with Steven Russell Thomas. He is the Associate Academic Dean here at Columbia College, Chicago.*

**And I'd like to start with asking you, when did you come to Columbia, and what were the circumstances that brought you here?**

I came to Columbia College in the summer of 1974. I had been teaching in Iowa, and had chaired an English Department there, but in the social upheavals of the late '70s, I abandoned that and came to Chicago. And after being here a few years, I thought, well, I would like to teach again. I hadn't been in Chicago many years, so I got the Yellow Pages out and looked for the names of colleges and schools. And Columbia was fairly much at the top of that list. I called Columbia. And Lou Silverstein was in that year. It was his last year as Academic Dean. And I must have called in maybe March or April, and he said, "well, sure, we might be interested; send some course proposals in." So I sent two course proposals, and the one that they wanted was Liberal Education and the Arts. And so Louis called me and asked me to come for an interview, and I did.

**Were they looking for that, or was that one of your course proposals?**

That was one of my course proposals. They had no—they had no agenda in terms of we want to offer "X" course, let's find a teacher for it; more what can you offer that sounds exciting. And so I came

down, I met Louis; we agreed that I would teach in the summer term. And that was about it. I remember coming down to the college in the middle of June for the first day of classes, and a nice young woman named Libby Jones, who was then the Registrar pointed me out to the classroom. In these days we were renting space on Lake Shore Drive at Ohio Street in an old warehouse and an old office building. And I remember walking toward my classroom and going into it, and there was a cracked chalkboard in the wall, and pipes over the ceiling, and room full of kids.

It was an almost magical summer. I had never—I've taught at other places, but I've never had students as kind of stimulating and assertive and involved as those students were. They were wonderful. So when the summer term was winding down, Louis asked me if I wanted to teach again in the fall, and I said, "sure." So I taught again in the fall, probably the same course. As spring arrived—at that point, actually, in the fall term in September Lya Rosenblum came as an assistant to Lou, with the intention of becoming the academic dean in the next year. So Lya was working with registration and she asked me, and Louis asked me if I would help with registration counseling, because it was a strictly administrative affair at the time, they didn't have many faculty. And I said, "sure, I'd be glad to." So I worked with Lya on that, and then at the end of that year, Lou stepped down as dean and became a faculty member in the newly formed Education Department and Lya

became the dean. And Lya asked me if I would start advising students, because she perceived that there wasn't much advising on a global level for students. Departmental advising, but not much global advising.

So in the fall of 1976, I became the first academic adviser. And I literally worked out of a shoulder bag filled with forms I created, sitting in chairs in the hall, and one Thursday afternoon each week, the Assistant to the Business Manager gave up her office, so I could see students in the office. That was in 1976. In the spring of 1977, we moved to this building, to the South Loop. And I became full-time. I was part-time as the first, when I was first advisor. And had an office in the building, a real office. I didn't have to surrender to somebody at the end of the day. Subsequently I hired another full-time advisor and two part-time people. A year later, maybe we



expanded again. Because when we came to this building, a phenomenon occurred that nobody was prepared for, and I think people had various explanations for it. We moved here in the spring of '77. In the fall of '78 we had a huge enrollment increase, maybe 2,000 students more than we'd had before. It was extraordinary. People were pressed into teaching who hadn't taught in years. We couldn't get enough classes. I think many people didn't understand that phenomenon. It was my opinion then, and it remains my opinion that, people thought Columbia, and it looked like Loyola and DePaul and Roosevelt, another downtown high-rise college, let's go there. And they expected, I think that we were much like Roosevelt or DePaul or Loyola, and we weren't.

But I attribute that external perception, as being the thing that generated our change towards being a more traditional liberal arts—well, a Media and Communications College. But as a result of the student expectations, we began to respond with enhanced advising, with more detailed programs of study, with more requirements to move through courses of study. And I think it was largely on the basis of people thinking this is like any other college or university.

There were lots of stresses for us with that. There were lots of ways in which people didn't want to move in that direction. I know a faculty member who retired this year who still talks about the fact that, Columbia isn't the Columbia it was. And it truly isn't. Much I think that's at the very heart of

who we are remains uncontaminated, but it's a very different place. And I think it began not as a result of long-range curriculum planning, I know it wasn't that, because I was here for that. But because we looked and had become permanent. We looked permanent, we had become permanent. And so that the increase of students, of course, there was an enhanced need for more faculty, for more staff, for more advisors, and for the development of policies to address the issues of a much more diverse student body.

As I found that that was happening, I found I was spending more and more time working with Lya, on policy and implementation. And I negotiated relinquishing my role as Director of Advising.

**Before we go on, I want to just follow up on that. Why do you think that they asked you? What was it about you to become this first faculty academic advisor?**

I'd like to say is because it's clear that I had extraordinary abilities in that area. And I think I am a good advisor. But it actually came from the fact that I was willing to devote all the hours necessary to registration counseling, for 2 or 3 semesters. So by the time Lea was looking around for likely candidates, I already knew the curriculum. I had a feel for the students. I'd been in the classrooms. I had come here as a professional teacher, which many of our part-time teachers don't. And I think she just saw, that she could capitalize on my already existing knowledge of the curriculum, and the fact that I already had been registering students, and in some ways making a more successful experience out of that than it had been. I'm kind of a procedures sort of person, and so I like to put in

place, things that I think will work in the real world. And I think that Lea saw that, and she and I had worked together a lot, and I think she trusted my work with students, and it in a way was an easy choice.

**Did you stop teaching once you became full-time, and was that a hard transition? Have you missed that or?**

I have. When I was 6 years old, I knew I wanted to be an English teacher. But I'm very sympathetic to students in higher education who say they come to college to find what they want to do. There's a level which I don't connect to that, because I always knew that, and my perception has always been that by the time you're here, maybe you should know it. And I understand that that's not true for many of today's students, but I always did. And as it turns out, I've really only been about 3 years in the classroom, and all the rest of the time I've been in administration for the other 24 years.

And yes, I did leave teaching when I became full-time because unlike some people whose stamina I guess, I admire, I can't do a 9 to 5 job and give that what that needs and then after that teach a class, do class preparations, all the things that the class needs. I have to do one, or the other. But I personally, cannot easily combine having a classroom responsibility and the other, so I did stop teaching. And I missed it, and I still do. And I will maybe return to the classroom one day, you know, toward the end of my career, which is getting closer and closer.

But I also know that in administration, we have the ability to affect student life in a kind of global

sense; that is, I knew even back then, working off Lya, that if we could craft policies that helped the student get through programs of study, that that was as important as seeing those epiphanies in the classroom, or being the kind of teacher who guides the student. You know, they have had their own rewards, outside of the one by one case. But if I could create an environment through policy that was student-friendly, that would be my contribution to education, that that was how I would satisfy my life-long ambition as a teacher.

**Why don't you talk about maybe that environment that you created? What kind of policy innovations did you help put in place that helped create that environment?**

Well, when I looked at your list of questions and it said something about what are your accomplishment, whatever, that is my accomplishment. And I thought about that a long time, that I created at Lya's direction, academic structures for helping students get through programs. For example, we had a number of students who had non-traditional credit that they wanted applied their degrees. We had to create a policy and a mechanism by which that could be evaluated and decided and posted, and I was the one who created that structure. That eventually became a whole program of non-classroom credit awarding programs.

I didn't create the fact that there's credit for life equivalencies, but I did create the mechanism at Columbia College by which students can take advantage of it. I didn't create internships, but I fashioned the policies that now considerably changed, but at the time fashioned the policies that

allowed students to get into those programs of study so that the college had a mechanism for doing it. So it's kind of a genuinely behind the scenes.

The acceptance of AP credit, I was the one who negotiated with the CLEP people for the acceptance of CLEP credits, all those non-credit programs. Methods of registration, which in my day was really chaotic. I mean, we opened the doors and said, "ya all come," and they did. I worked with the registrar to create patterns and registration procedures that enabled students to whatever extent we could, to get the classes they needed at the times they needed them. As we moved into a data age, I helped to create the databases, not necessarily technically entering them or constructing them, but the way in which the college needed that information and what we were going to do with it. So it's those kind of behind the scenes thing. I was very instrumental in developing the College's policies regarding academic good standing, how students would navigate through that, disciplinary problems.

We created all of that. From 1978 to 1988, maybe was really a period of creation of a college, with policies and procedures. Some of them didn't work. We only realized that when we implemented them. Some of them are still in place today. I've always been particularly deeply involved in the resolution of student problems in an academic setting. For many years, because of who I was, I also got all the disciplinary problems, too, but I slowly managed to extricate myself from that.

I'm a red tape cutter, and one of the advantages of being in an institution for a long time is that I've developed personal relationships with all the key people. We have long histories, I know all the ins and outs of everything. And so when students have problems that are complicated enough that they get to the dean's office, typically I'm the person who resolves that. And again, that is kind of behind the scenes to the College, but it does give me the satisfaction of seeing a person whose life was complicated and who might be leaving school or a class, get out of the difficulty, because somebody who knew how to make a phone call and who to call and what questions to ask was able to resolve an issue.

So I guess that's kind of the individual epiphany side. Often I don't remember that. It's interesting; I seem to have no recent or even late memory, because students will come back and say, "oh, I remember when you helped me with—really glad to see you," I haven't enough truth to say. I don't remember it.

**If you had this position at another college, would it be different? Is Columbia different; are the students different? Do you think their policies needed to be different; more creative or more flexible?**

They just needed to be.

**There was an absence.**

The key to this—and I don't think—I don't think it could be replicated. I know it's hard to use the word unique, because few things are unique. But there was a time in Columbia's history that I was fortunate enough to be a part of, where we were no longer what

we had been in the late '60s and very early '70s before accreditation in '73. But in those days there was almost this sort of almost magical college on the street, you know, the thing was parents have never heard of Columbia but their kids all have. And they came here and took dance, and poetry. And there was this kind of wonderful street college. That began to change under accreditation, because of course you conformed to central, or any accreditation agency guidelines.

But then there was sort of the golden period, or mythical period of the street college of which I was not a part. We were accredited in '73; I came in '74. And then there was the silver age, from when we moved here, to South Loop, I really believe that moving to the South Loop and becoming a high-rise college compelled us to respond to those perceptions. And we had this wonderful period of 10 to 12 years of creating a college.

I don't think anybody with my position and rank in other schools would be able to have gone through the creative process, because for the most part, the policies are there. I mean, even like newly springing up community colleges and things, there's a form into which they fit. Lya Rosenblum and Bert Gaul and myself and others genuinely—in response to student demand, created the policies and the practices of the College. And it's a unique experience. You know, there was a lot of flexibility. Lya was a wonderful person to work for because she allowed a lot of autonomy and creativity. We in 1980, we introduced majors as courses of study. We'd never had majors before. We

realized after we had done that that having a series of majors means you have prerequisites. Well, how do you work prerequisites?

A lot of this is faculty driven, and the faculty did create these programs, but it was not easy. They did not spring full-grown from the Head of Zeus, like Athena. It was years. In fact, it's only been this year that we've gotten to the point that we require a student to have a major degree. In the old days, they finished 124 hours, and that was it. In the Silver Age, they finished 124 hours and a suggested major that we'd really like you to do, but if you don't, it's okay. Now we're much more traditional. You have to have a major. And when I came here, there was always the General Studies requirement of the 48 hours, but it was undistributed. You racked up 48 hours, and Literature of the Absurd, and other literature courses, you could do that.

In 1981, I think, we had proposed that the general studies be distributed among subject areas, and the faculty worked on that. And again, once the faculty made decisions, I was the person who took those decisions and created behind it procedures that would allow it to happen. I knew for example that if we didn't up front designate for example the social science classes, on the back end we were going to have a lot of arguments from the students later saying, well, I took this and it must be a social science. Well, I created a way of designating the courses up front, which we still use today. It made sense, it was going to work. You know, in itself, it seems like a small accomplish-

ment, but it guided the way we construct our General Ed and how it appears on the transcript and how it's ultimately audited for the student.

And that—it really was a wonderful time. We experimented with some courses. We had a series of courses that at one time tried to provide a common artistic vocabulary to all students. It didn't work, but it was, as a standalone a very unique course of study. We tried at one point when I was involved in an artist and apprenticeship program for students who needed enhanced advising and motivation. And that was a good program, but we didn't continue it, but it was a period of experimentation.

I started the first orientation for students, and that was me standing in a film screening room that helped 60, maybe 90 students, talking to them for about an hour and a half about their Gen Ed requirements and their degree requirements. That has now become this year. It's great to be this sort of almost summer-long program that's partly residential. People are going to be here on campus, and there's a parents component, and there's parties and games and all sorts of games. And I'm neither a parties nor a game person. I like to see this moving to doing that. But in my day, it was what I did satisfied the need that we had at the present, at that time. My getting people to come down for an orientation was unique; we'd never done it. It was a small effort, but it was the genesis of what is today the major entry experience for all students to the College. It's now required, and we don't require things easily.



So again, to go back to that question that you asked, I think it was unique. I don't think other—I mean, certain other colleges debate policy and change policy. But we created it; we had nothing out there. And it was often reactive rather than proactive.

**You were talking about—referring to a period of experimentation; is that period over, or do you feel Columbia still does that, or is willing to do it?**

It is my perception that that period of creativity is pretty much over. I'm not sure that somebody coming in today would be able to make the job what they want it to be and the way we were. Certainly, one of the things that is true of Columbia is that we—at our very core, the essence of who we are, is an entrepreneurial spirit. It's hard to govern; it's hard to manage; it's an administrative stress. But it's also the very strength of who we are. And there are dynamic people who can come in, and by force of personality, and by their vision, make things happen. But in a sort of global sense, I'm not sure that can still happen. We've got too much policy now to allow that kind of thing to happen. Everywhere somebody would turn, they'd bump up against something that had already been done; whereas in my day, it turned down, there was nothing there, so you built something, and it looked nice. And then you move out for the next thing, and maybe that flat fell down, and you'd build it again.

But now there's structure. For example in 1981, maybe, Lyaorganized, started a thing called the Academic Planning Council, the first governance seedling in the institution. Now there's a structure of Academic Affairs and College Council and President's Cabinet,

and Curriculum Committee, all those things that you can't really move against. We got to choose where to put all those things. And so I think that probably that experience will never come again.

**I want to return to the point you made earlier. You said "The heart of Columbia College is the same; it is still uncontaminated." Can you talk about that, what the heart is that remained constant?**

A large part of it is that entrepreneurial spirit. And another part of it is our commitment to open enrollment. It's been battered around a lot lately, but like a seaworthy vessel, it's come through; it made it into harbor. But I think really we perceive ourselves as serving the students best educationally when we respond quickly to market forces in education, we allow people to develop courses and programs, and it's very hard to manage. I think we maybe do a little less at the more spontaneous stuff, but still our courses, our curricula tends to be very fluid. We see that as a strength, because if people in Marketing want Direct Data Marketing. And we might draw up Writing for Managers, because nobody's doing that any more. I think every college does that, but I think we allow it to have a bigger impact in the student's course of study. I think we tend to change programs more quickly.

We value individual as an over-collective judgment very often. On the positive side, that allows the dynamic visionaries to make a good impact. On the negative side, that allows for the smoke-filled, back-room decision making. And those things have to be balanced. You have to make a decision about—it's much like our part-time faculty; we have 953 part-time faculty, but

we have a large, now, a large area of responsibility. We have 230 full-time—maybe a little more than that, but if you consider the people on sabbatical or on leave or on teaching assignments, maybe 230 in any given term. Well, the strength of that part-time faculty is they're the working professionals in the area who're doing what they teach, and students have the opportunity for very unusually direct connection to advertising agencies, television studios. The downside is that most of those people are not professional teachers. They come here once a week. They are not essentially connected to the College. And somehow we entrust them with the mission of the College. It's quite possible for a student to go through an entire college program here—I think it would still be possible.

**You were saying it's possible?**

It might be. I'd have to say today with a little reservation, but I think it would be possible for many students to go through all or most of their program and never see a full-time faculty member.

Again, the strength to that is their connection with the world of work. The downside is do these people, do our part-time faculty, really immerse themselves in the spirit of the college, value social and ethnic diversity in the classroom, play to that strength. It isn't enough just to say, we have diverse classrooms. We have to be willing to do things like—and this is—again, I used to do programs for the part-time faculty and say things like, "you need to practice inclusive language. You need to use 'her' as the pronoun in 50 percent of your sentences. You need to choose words that don't have 'man' or 'son' at the end of them." People sometimes quite resent that.

Well, we need—but we need to make sure that people absorb and believe in and are enriched by our belief in diversity. How do we do that? Workshops, programs, mailings. Is that enough? I don't know. One of the features of Columbia is because we are a commuter school, and because of the way students are today, they have families and full-time jobs, for many of them, Columbia is not the center of their lives. And that's true for the faculty as well. So we had this—we're more a collection of people with commonality rather than a community, and we want to be a community. Maybe we shouldn't want to be a community. Maybe we should—but that's more speculating. That's not what we're talking about here.

But this all arises out of that early entrepreneurial thing, where someone going down the Yellow Pages, could call up and say I'd like to teach a course there and come in and teach a course. And 27 years later I'm dealing with diversity in the classroom and a part-time faculty that need to be here enough to believe in our mission, to believe in the fact that we want every student to be on a level playing field. Our founding president, Mike Alexandroff, always looked at Columbia as a place where "What you had done in the past didn't matter." We didn't admit people on probation; we still don't. We don't transfer grades. You come in. Well, Mike's view of that was, you just kind of throw into the process, and you got your chance.

Part of what we created in the '80s, came out of an awareness that it's all very well to say that, and it's good to say that, but people are coming from anywhere but a level

playing field. And so developmental classes had to be added. And reading specialists had to be hired. And special needs areas had to be developed. And all these things came about as a result of our collective experience, like any dot.com company right now finding out that your market either works or it doesn't, and you got to do this and then you drop that. That's exactly the way we progress through the Silver Age, the very late '70s, early '80s was coming to understand who are students are, what their expectations are, and that you don't necessarily meet those expectations by saying, you all come and have a good time. But by putting into place the supports and the structures and dealing with the issues of the people in the major granting department, saying the strengths, the resources, the facilities should go to us because we're teaching that; not to more English classes with developmental. And there's always that, and every college has that stress.

But ours was simply in the most basic provision support services. And I think we've done a fair job with it. I think that we've fairly much responded appropriately to the needs as they were presented to us. We still don't do any long-range planning. We respond. It's a matter of rescript; not proscript. We wait till an issue is brought to us and then we make a reasoned judgment that becomes a policy.

**You've already spoken to the values of diversity and open enrollment. Could you expand on those, or maybe give your definition of the mission of Columbia College, in your own words?**

Herman Conoway, the now deceased Dean of Students, used to have me do presentations to the

faculty and staff on the mission of the College. It was something my job entailed during that period when I was his associate. And it's one thing to look at the catalog rhetoric. And it's pretty high flown, the students should offer the culture of their time, and to admit unstrictly at the undergraduate level, all sorts of beautiful missions for open admissions, and we're trying to get a good education. But I think the real mission of Columbia College is to give every applicant an opportunity to experience a chosen course of study with a career consequence. And that how we do that has changed pretty dramatically over the years. But that's still the goal.

We used to believe that the student should come right into the major, and start doing production or design or whatever, right up front, that that's how you engage a student. And it was successful to a degree. Over the years, the faculty, supported by the administration, has come to believe that the best way to achieve that same goal is by testing before admission, although not restricting admission based on it, placement into classes, either development or regular, a series of prerequisites in General Ed and writing before getting into the majors. It's really kind of turned on its head our most striking practice, which was that students could enter immediately into their major. The fact that we turned the practice on its head is confused by a number of people, by making them think that we've changed the mission. The purpose remains unchanged; in a sense, the policy remains unchanged, and that is to give every student the best shot at experiencing the educational

program that will lead to the career they choose. It's just that we now no longer think that that's the way to do it. But the belief is the same.

And that's where the academic dialog can take place. Is testing good, is testing not good, is testing socially biased, is it not. Should we let people go right into the majors, or take courses in writing first. Those are debates that must go on. The College has moved to the latter, but it's because the majority voice in the College believes that that's the best way to achieve that goal and giving every student the best shot at the career they choose. I think measured against other schools and certainly industry, we are near the top of the list for putting into practice our beliefs about diversity. We have a long way to go. Maybe if I was interested in what they're representing, I might see that differently, but I'm a gay man who can pass and so I know what it's like to be in the privileged class of the straight white male. I also know what it means to be marginalized. And I see among our student body that most students here aren't marginalized; they are given a voice. Ethnic, gender, orientation issues, we have a ways to go on all of that, but for the most part, students here I believe benefit from the fact that we really do value diversity.

One of my concerns is because we have this huge influx of part-time teachers, and few hundred change every semester, I have no way of knowing, no one has any way of knowing unless it's a really outstanding, whether or not a person is gender friendly or ethnic friendly or any of those kinds of belief. And so we do have occasions where students do feel that they're

being marginalized. But I think when the College comes into that, we respond pretty quickly to it.

So in very different ways, we are still pursuing the same vision that founded this school, which was everyone's got an equal shot, everyone's got equal value, everyone should have the same chance. You got to get the best you can get and then take it and run with it. And that's that entrepreneurial thing again, too. We'll give you the best you've got, but you've got to run with it. Typically, I used to say in orientation to people that Columbia—and it was true, had a lot of support services and a lot of mechanisms. But every single one of them was only put into action when the student requested it. "You've got to be engaged; you've got to run with it; you've got to say, I need this; I'm going to go get it and I'm going to make use of it; I'm going to run with it."

I think that's changing a lot with this new orientation where there's a tremendous amount of outreach, and people are almost over-outreached. I don't think that's quite true yet, and maybe it never is in a way. But any possibility is out there. You meet people, you get to know their names, you get business cards, you get locations. We didn't typically do that. All those things were there, but the student had to come and get them.

So again, the philosophy, the vision, the heart of it hasn't changed, but the way we think we could implement it in the student's best interest is almost the reverse of what we used to do. What we reserved again in another 20 years, maybe so; trends come and go in education. Maybe not in that area quite so quickly, but as the creators and visionaries have retired or

stepped down or taken other roles in the College, other needs have pressed forward and been responded to in other ways than maybe we would have. And if as in any entrepreneurial organization, growth and development and income is any measure of success, we're doing something right. It's very different from what we did in the Silver Age. I'm a lot calmer as I age.

#### **When did the Silver Age end?**

I would say the Silver Age must have been over by 1987 or '88. There was a major shake-up in administration at that point that seemed to people who weren't in the inner circles to be arbitrary and no understandable. Lya was promoted to being vice president and dean of the graduate school; a new Undergraduate Dean was engaged. Several other key administrators changed their roles. And that was kind of a bumpy ride for a few years. When we got through that phase in the very early '90s, '91, '92, I think you can look back at that sort of the Sack of Rome was the end of the Renaissance. Or maybe by '92 the Renaissance was over or the Silver Age was over, and where policies were in place, the majors were there, the graduate's school's flourishing, the administration's fairly stable. Practices are being built on prior policies in the way they hadn't quite been before. And so now here we are 20 years later, what people thought we were in 1977 when we moved here. I think by 1997, 20 years later, we had become the high-rise downtown structured school.

We're known as Communications and Media Arts. And we're a little quirky and our students are art students, so there's always going to be that, but I think it took us 20



years of unplanned change and growth to get where we are now. And I think someone into Columbia today would see a much more typical, you take your Compass exam when you come in, you get class placement, there's an academic advisor from the faculty and staff, there's orientation, there's student organizations, there's a student government, nascent, but still a little while. It'll never flourish though, here, because this is now a commuter school, and this is not what kids particularly want. I think we sort of want them to want it and they don't.

There's a structure with Vice President for Student Affairs, Vice President for Academic Affairs, management people. This was a couple of people in an office running paper back and forth and doing stuff then and now it's a structure that has its own life, and it's going to live that way.

**I want to return to the theme of diversity one more time. I want to ask you, as a gay man, did you feel more comfortable at Columbia; was that something that also evolved?**

I'm so glad you're asking. I keep interrupting you; I'm sorry about that. But I came here at an openly gay time, and Lou Silverstein knew that. And I give that man lots of credit. He and I have had our differences over the years, but I love that man. That was not an issue to him. And I only learned a number of years later that it had been a little issue to some other people, and he kind of put out those fires. I always felt comfortable here, although when I came here, I was the only openly gay person on

campus. And within the first two semesters, people had motioned me into their offices and whispered to me that they were also gay. And it was interesting to me to watch the gay people here come out. I guess one of my accomplishments, I didn't think about that when I was looking at this.

I'm not a particularly political person in the sense of don't march notch and I don't do political things, but I live openly and I don't pull back from controversy in those areas. And the community, the gay community here did sort of blossom, you know, everybody realized that closets have glass doors anyway, so what's the point. As the AIDS crisis overtook the gay community, I was very active in the programs here on campus, and I did some other stuff, too, in the community, but I remembered being on one of the first panels that we had maybe in '82 or '83. It was very early. Zefra Lerman was very strong on getting the AIDS education out there. And I remember saying on the panel, that as a gay man, "I had seen members of my community get sick and die, and as an educator, I believed the best way to encounter this was through education." And that caused an unexpected flurry of negative reaction among some of the faculty. I was surprised at it. Many people thought that I shouldn't have done that. Now, I don't know who didn't know that I was a gay man; maybe most people didn't, because I don't tend to join groups, I don't tend — even now, I don't go to the Lesbian-Gay and Transgender and Bisexual Organization, not that I'm not interested, but it's not that I do. So maybe many people didn't know that. But I remember being quite

surprised to hear that there had been something of a backlash against that.

But this a gay-friendly place overall. I remember again, many years ago, somebody was doing a doctoral dissertation in sociology on gay men who are out in straight workplaces. And so he was calling for volunteers for his research project. And I called him and he said, "come and talk to me, I'll tell you about it." Well, we did an interview with this kind of length and nature, and at the end of it, he said, "well, I don't think I can use you in my research because this is not a straight organization. There's just no way. Your experience here is not typical." And believe that's true, and I have to often refer to that, both in dealing with students and with faculty, that education by and large is more open to diversity of various kinds. You know, the role of the university is to foster the role best and diverse dialog, and so there's always historically from the outset been in universities a more open dialog, which is not to say that that dialog has not been hemmed in by many strongly held prejudices.

But just the fact that we are an education, gives us, this is not a factory where women are being harassed and called names just because they're working on an assembly line. At the same time, it is also an art school that was founded by old leftist liberals who — so there are many things about my experience here and the experience of other people that is probably not typical. But this has been a great place for me. I tend to occasionally get on the fringes of out-

geous, even though I'm not really an outrageous person, but I can joke about things, I can be self-deprecating, I can call myself a "Queen," I can do things like that in fairly public forums. The other day the registrar was trying to make sure that everybody was on the same page, and he turned to me and said, "Is that clear, are you straight?" I said, "Yes and no."

So I can do things like that, and so can other people. It's pretty diverse. I think we have a long way to go. I still see—maybe I should say this in the interview, but I will. I still see that there's a deep strain of sexism operating somewhere in our psyche. I almost think that in some ways gay people have a better shot, but women here—maybe I'm not right about it. I've been maybe away from my desk too long, but I think there's still a ways to go. I would ask you if you had women express that.

**It's not the first time that it's come up.**

Yeah, I would think not, because I think it's there. And I think it's something we have to continue to pay attention, almost more than to the gay thing. I did go to a luncheon that the Vice President of Student Affairs had because everybody kept telling me it's important to swallow the numbers, because he's got to see that there's interest here. So I went and I heard people talk about their issues. And I do know that what we need—and this is the same thing for women and for ethnic minorities. What we need is not student organizations and clubs and support groups and chat rooms. What we need is to integrate into our curriculum seamlessly the values of diversity. On a

most gross level, that might mean inclusive language. Awkward as that is on some tongues, hard as it may be sometimes to do it, it's important. We've got to move there.

It means when we teach Great Works of Literature, we include literature of African-American women, but we don't do it because it's African-American women, but because we focus on the literature. It's striking to me that very often art exhibits for African-Americans and Native Americans are often held in museums as natural art rather than art museums. That's the kind of thing we've got to get away from; you're not diverse when you're usually African American writers, or we'll study them. Or the women writers. We need it in the classroom. We need for faculty to be comfortable with women, with ethnic underrepresented populations, with all of them. Again, that's the stress with a large mobile faculty, is do the chairpersons have the opportunity to reject somebody with the open classes, the class doesn't have a teacher, John says he can teach it, can I sit there and have an hour's conversation with him and determine his views on this without directly asking them and say maybe well, I don't think I'm going to hire this guy. You don't in the practical world, but somehow we've got to. Because the mission of the institution depends on it.

As I said, many students can go through this college without seeing a full-time faculty member who is more a part of this community and has believed in our values enough to stake their career on it. If these students could go through and never see those people, are they

going to feel that this is the place that we believe it to be and want it to be and have somehow to make it. And I have always from the outset seen my job, and expressed it as trying to catalog rhetoric into a reality of the student's lives, but that's what administration does. It takes that mission statement and crafts something that makes it real for the students. What does it mean to admit unstrictly? What does it mean that we want you to author the culture of your time. What is that culture, and is it diverse, and how do we show you that this is the value. And so that's what I do.

**I'm glad I asked. I had one more question about diversity, or the value of it. I also wanted to come back to if you could just briefly expand on your commitment or your belief in the open admissions. Why is it important that Columbia remains an open admissions college institution of higher education?**

Well, as you know, if you've talked to people here, it's a thorny issue and it's a buzzword around here. And people come down on one side of it or another, which is said to be grief.

**Only because I want to make sure it's part of the interview.**

Open admissions seems in some ways to be an essentially urban component to the mission. If we practice selective admissions, many students from the city system would be ineligible to attend Columbia. And that would deprive our culture of the opportunity to hear the voices of many underrepresented populations, or maybe even many underachieving students

who have historically not achieved well who have come to Columbia and found their voice. That is a real thing that happens here. It sounds somewhat artificial to say it, or it sounds like a rhetorical flourish, but I had the privilege in my years here of working with many students whose parents will tell me they never did well, they didn't have good grades in high school or in their previous colleges, or for whatever reason it didn't work. And they've come here. And because they didn't have to come through any hoops to get in, and they found an accepting community when they got here, and they found challenging courses, they became successful students who graduated and moved into careers that were to them satisfying. The world is not run by Phi Beta Kaps, it's run by people who have "C" averages. And that's fine. But if we limited people at the outset, we'd never seen them to the end.

When we first put into place—because we were mandated by the federal government, a fairly stringent satisfactory academic progress policy. I was in charge of both constructing it for the campus parameters and then implementing it with the students and being the one who said, "sorry, dear you're not coming back next term." And what I saw in many cases, which compelled—and other people saw it as well, which is why we started putting in place support services and so forth. I saw many students sitting across the desk with another white man who was telling them they weren't good enough. Now, race wasn't the issue in every case, or even in many cases, but it was yet another person saying, you didn't make it. The disappointment, the frustration, the anger—

and I'm not saying we shouldn't have standards of academic progress, and people who aren't making it should make some other choice, at least for the time being. But I really passionately believe in the only barriers being barriers that support the student achievement. And in some ways, satisfactory academic progress does that, because we have a long period of counseling and encouragement and opportunities to repair damage. If we put those barriers at the front end, they're sunk.

So I really believe success in high school, high school GPAs, or SAT and ACT scores maybe help us to know something about a student, but should never be a barrier to a student coming here and getting a shot at being the cinematographer, like the guy who won the Oscar for *Schindler's List*. That's in a worldly way, that's one of our success stories. In a more unworldly way, it's anybody who's come here, had academic success, gotten a job that satisfies, has given them a place that fits for them, and you're going to hear about the Oscar winners, because we bally-ho that all the time. But for every one of those the non-inconsequential, there are a lot of people that we admitted that nobody else. And other schools will admit people, and truth to say, I think in these pressure days there are more open admissions than they'd like to admit. We see it as a strength.