

## Randy Albers

*...but, you know, we can make due. All right, we're interviewing Randy Albers on the, I can't think of the date, today is the twenty-third of March.*

Twenty-third of 1998.

**So tell me how you got to Columbia College, what were the circumstances?"**

Well, I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago and I had gotten tired of the program there for a while and escaped to California for a couple of years. And then, when it didn't look like any particularly interesting job prospects were gonna be marching down the road towards me, I decided to come back here and finish my grad studies. So once I returned I sent out a flood of resumes to colleges around the city area. I had taught a couple classes at the U of C as a grad student and I had taught a private course in Creative Writing out in California and I taught at Golden Gate University, out in California, part-time. And really I was just looking for a place here where I could get some further teaching experience. Chicago State was the first school to respond. I started teaching there in the Fall of 1977. Partway through that semester, I got a call from John Schultz—who was the Chair of the Writing/English department here at Columbia for almost thirty years—and he asked me if I wanted to come in and interview for a position here. I really knew nothing about Columbia. I came in; I interviewed with him. He and I got to talking really more, in some ways, more about my background growing up on a farm in Minnesota. And I told

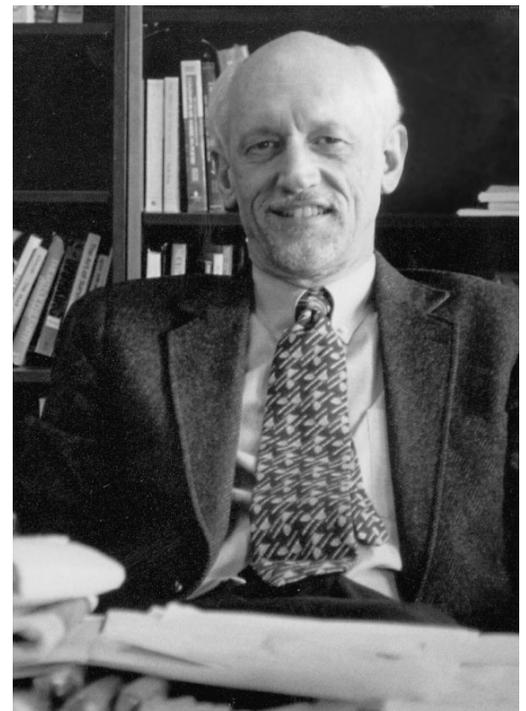
him about starting out in a one-room schoolhouse on the corner of my father's farm and the first two grades when I went. And he had grown up in the country in Iowa, and we kind of hit it off that way. And he invited me to come and teach at Writing Workshop, which at that point was the equivalent of English Comp I. They—at that point they had a very intensive teacher in-service teacher training program—in the Story Workshop approach—which I knew nothing about at that point, but I dove into it. I was interested in the College for a number of reasons almost immediately; the intense focus on, sort of, high-quality teaching immediately appealed to me. As soon as I stepped in a classroom I was immediately drawn to the students: the diversity of students; the number of students who were first generation college students and who came from such a wide variety of backgrounds, skills, levels, and all sorts of things; many working-class students.

Immediately I really began to appreciate what Columbia was all about. There was great emphasis placed on the mission and connecting that directly to the work of the department in the classroom. And I—it was a very different kind of approach to education that I had, was familiar with.

**What had you been teaching at Chicago State and what other...**

Well, I taught a sort of straight composition, English Composition class, at Chicago State; previous to that, I'd taught in a Humanities core at the U of C, which were two very different experiences. The thing though, that perhaps just by way of comparison, when I went to

Chicago State they gave me the class list, they gave me a text, told me that the students would have to pass an exit exam at the end of the semester, and just basically told me, "Go at it!", and that's all the direction I got. Late in the semester, after the students had taken their exams, the offices were set up in such a way they had these, sort of, little cubicles with walls that didn't go all the way to the ceiling. So you could hear voices from other offices. And I heard the director of the Comp program talking to the chair of the department one day about how poorly the students, as a rule, were doing in passing this exit exam—particularly those students who were being taught by part-time teachers. And she said, I heard her say, "I just don't know what it is about these teachers. We just can't get teachers who can get the material across." And I was, you know, I was overhearing this; I was angry. I found that my students had done fairly well on this exit exam but I was angry because I felt



that they'd given us no help whatsoever. On the other hand—I had started at Columbia in the middle of that experience, in the middle of that semester or that quarter at Chicago State—and was immediately asked to participate in five in-service workshops of four hours each over the course of a semester in addition to sitting in, taking a class, Fiction class, where I, you know, would be doing activities being directed by a Story Workshop teacher and then teach, you know? And the combination was clearly important to the department in getting a certain level of quality instruction. So it was a very stark contrast with what I had experienced at other places. Even at the U of C, where in the core sequence there the teachers meet periodically to talk about the text, the emphasis was much more on discussion of content and ideas than it was on actual teaching, pedagogy. So, even in contrast with that experience it was a very good thing for me. And for the first time I really began to feel that I was learning how to teach. Plenty of teachers and a lot of schools where they knew material well. So anyway, I, you know, it was a variety of things that when I walked in the door at Columbia really, really appealed to me. But I guess those were the main things: the emphasis on the teaching and then the just incredible diversity of the students. Being able to go into a class every week and hear all these amazing stories from all these different cultural backgrounds, it was just a wonderful breath of fresh air for me.

**So you did this for the next, what, year or year and a half?**  
I taught part-time for a year and a half, started out teaching one course then they asked me to teach

two. And then, then they had created a position, at that point, in the Writing Department because they had so many Writing Workshops. They created kind of a middle-level position, what they called “adjunct,” which was essentially similar in some ways to our present Artist in Residence status. You taught a full load, you were paid less than a full-timer, you received health benefits but you didn't put anything into a retirement plan or anything like that, and you were not expected to undertake any kind of committee work or administrative work. In fact, some of us, I guess, did that but it was pretty voluntary. They may have paid me some sort of small stipend, you know. I was asked to be on an early curriculum committee. I was asked by the dean to serve on that. And I did some departmental administrative work. But on the whole you weren't asked to, you didn't have the same status as a full-timer other than teaching the same course load, you taught twelve hours. I stayed in that role for about, I think it was about three years, something like that, two and a half, three years. And then they decided to get rid of that position and they converted people—over the course of the next couple years, they converted most of those adjuncts to fill up regular full-time positions. And I've been a full-time faculty member ever since then, it would have been somewhere about '83 or so maybe, something like that, '82 or '83. And then two years ago—when John Schultz retired and I became—I was asked by the faculty to, you know, apply for the job of Chair in the Fiction Writing Department. So that's how I eventually got here.

**OK. What courses have you taught along the way?**

Well, I've taught a real variety. When I first came I taught, as I say, Writing Workshop I; later, Writing Workshop II. I taught a course that we had in that department called English Usage which was kind of broad based course with a little various usage issues. I taught an Introduction to Literature survey course, I taught Romantic Poets, which was my specialty as a grad student. I taught, let's see, I taught Fiction I, Fiction II... Advanced Fiction. I'm teaching a thesis development class right now for grad students. I'm doing a—I guess I was the first person to teach a critical reading and writing class in this department which was a very, sort of, unique strand of classes. It's a course that is really text based but it's not a straight literature course by any means. It's a course that helps students learn how to read as writers, rather than as literary critics, you know? We look at issues of process and technique. They're responding to texts as writers and they're developing creative non-fiction essays and writers' processes: follow a few books to research, a book to research, try to find out everything they can, through private writings as well as public, about what went into the making of that book—the first lasting image, impulse—to the final drafts and dealings with the publishers. So it's a course that has, over the years, become a very large part of our program and it's a, it's a very, it's a unique strand of courses. There are now programs that they're putting in, maybe one or two such courses, but I don't think anywhere will you find the full range and complement of these kinds of courses that we have here.

**Would you have expected yourself to be teaching courses like that, or the other courses you're teaching, when you started writing about Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats?**

I don't think so. I think I envisioned that I would be, you know, I really expected to come here, teach part-time until I finished my degree or something and then—or at least got to a stage where I could begin applying for full-time positions—and that I would end up somewhere, some college or university somewhere doing literature courses mainly. I was fortunate in a way because, you know, in some ways it was blind luck that I ended up at Columbia and then I was fortunate after that in being sort of in the right place at the right time. You know, when they needed more people I happened to be there and they, I guess, had some, at least some appreciation for what I was doing, you know, and offered me first an adjunct position then later a full-time position. You know, any other set of circumstances, you know, I fully expected to be somewhere else. I'm just been incredibly lucky to find a place where I really love and was able to offer me a way to live.

**When you started the college was still up on Lake Shore Drive, is that right?**

No, I was, at that point we were already in the 600 South Building, 600 South Michigan. It was the only building so we were one of many departments in that building and I think at that point it was, I don't know, it was maybe fifteen hundred students, something like that? And the Writing/English Department, probably at that point, was the largest department

because Writing I and Writing II were actually the only courses that were specifically required of students. There were forty-eight hours of general studies that they had to have but they could be taken in any of the general studies areas. But everybody had to take Writing I and Writing II.

**What was that, what floor were you on?**

We were on the sixth.

**What was it like?**

Oh, I, it was cramped—to some extent—the classrooms were fine. The classrooms were nice but as a part-timer adjunct I was in an office that probably would be about the size of a regular, sort of, full-time faculty member office now, and shared it. Let's see, as I became adjunct I shared an office with George Bailey, who's still in the English Department. And that was great, we'd spend long hours, you know, talking about literature and discussing students; pedagogical problems, and so on. The office was kind of tucked in a corner of the department; it looked out across the, across Lake Michigan, so it was actually a fairly nice place to sit and have long discussions like that.

**How many people were there in the department all total, do you remember, at that time?**

All total, do you mean full-time and part-time?

**Yeah.**

Well, I could look that up. I don't know that I—I don't know that I really recall. There were maybe fifteen or twenty all together, you know? I don't know that it was too much bigger than that. Full-time? When I was first in the department there were probably about, maybe five full-time.

**Who do you remember among the students, faculty, administrators, from your earlier days?**

Who do I remember? Well, most of my dealings, particularly when I was a part-timer, most of my dealings were with John Schultz and Betty Shiflett who were—Betty was really the main person behind the composition end of things. You know, the Writing Workshop program, she supervised it. And she and John together ran a lot of the training sessions. We had, as I say, some fairly intensive training. You know, twenty hours of workshop, I mean, of in-service work, over the course of a semester, and that was a lot. But, yeah, I think most of my dealings were really, really with them in terms of faculty. And then George, George and I spent a lot of time, as I say, because we shared an office we spent a lot of time talking. I took—oh, let's see, I took early workshops, I sat in on early fiction workshops, you know, when I first came here, with Larry Heinemann and Andy Allegretti and then later with John and Betty. And I just learned a tremendous amount about writing and teaching from all of those people. Betty, Betty was an unbelievable teacher. She just has a sensitivity to people's imaginative problem solving that is really exceptional and I learned a great deal from her.

**Tell me a little bit about how the College was administered then; it was smaller.**

Yeah, I don't know that I—I don't know that I had much of an inkling of that until I, at least until I became adjunct. When I was part-time I was coming in and teaching a course and perhaps going into an in-service meeting and then pretty much leaving. But certainly it was clear that within

the departments chairs ran the show, that they were pretty much, you know, free agents. You know, they had an entrepreneurial approach here that was very different from what I had seen in other programs where the chairs were elected out of the faculty and were, kind of, grinning and bearing it most of the time. Here people really kind of took the initiative, not only in curriculum but in promoting the program and the College outside, to the outside community and nationally. Later on, as I became adjunct and then full-time, I began to realize, you know, that something more: that the College was really run by Mike Alexandroff. He was the person who had really given the vision to it and was largely responsible for, in some ways, keeping people aware of that vision and that mission. And, you know, certainly a lot of credit went to his wife, Jane, who did a lot of—wore a lot of different hats, and certainly to Bert Gall, who was probably the most consistent voice and has been the most consistent voice for the mission ever since I've been here, and on the Board. Let's see, Lya Rosenblum was the head—was fairly new to the College, I think at that point, but she was the Academic Dean. And I had some dealings with her because, as I say, she had appointed me to a Curriculum Committee, I don't know, somewhere around 1980 when I was first here. And I'm not quite sure why she wanted me on it. It may have been the fact that she—it may have been the fact that I was from U of C, she thought I would make some kind of contribution; I taught in a core program at the U of C. And she was, kind of had ideas, I think, of helping to solidify, in some way, the general ed area. And we spent a lot of time in that early Curriculum Committee talking about different

possibilities for general education. And Shirley Mordine was on that committee; in fact, out of those discussions Shirley and I sat in a restaurant in Evanston one day and sketched out what we thought might be a good idea for distribution of requirements here. And I think we ran them through the committee and then we gave them to Lya. And I think at that point they had a mass communications requirement that they wanted to have and then later on they—which never really panned out very well—and then later on they added the computer component. But other than that, those distribution requirements pretty much stood until maybe two or three years ago when they redid the gen ed. objectives and some of the—rearranged some of the requirements, restructured them a little bit although they're still, it's still pretty much, you know—at least broadly—it's the same things that we wrote then. You know, they've done a lot of refinements.

**How different, I'm curious, how different was that from what had, you said you wanted to solidify or that Lya Rosenblum wanted to solidify the gen ed. part of the College...**

Well, yeah. I mean, I think, I don't know if that's really the way to characterize it. I know that was my impression—maybe at eighteen years, seventeen or eighteen years distance—that's the way I'm characterizing it now as my memory of what she was saying. But I think that the College had really been, in some ways, founded on the notion that students would kind of put together their own programs and discover themselves and their own way of going at the arts and communications fields that they chose. I think what was happening

by 1980 or so, is that we had, as I mentioned earlier, we had forty-eight hours of general studies required, eight of which were in Writing Workshop I and Writing Workshop II. But students could take classes anywhere, I mean, there were the general education departments where they took the bulk of those classes, but they really could take classes—any class that was designated for gen. ed. credit—anywhere in the College to satisfy the other forty hours of general education. I think by 1980 or '81 there was a feeling that students—we needed to, in some way, insure that students at least had some knowledge in a variety of areas; that they couldn't just take their eight hours of Writing Workshops and then go load up in a particular area even if it was a gen ed area. So we were trying, with the new distribution requirements in general education, to kind of meet this double end of trying to, on the one hand, maintain the tradition that had served Columbia very well, of giving students choice and letting them design their own programs to some extent; and then on the other hand, to insure that they had at least some knowledge of a variety of those liberal education areas, you know, and science. So it wasn't perfect, it wasn't a perfect system but it was, at least was an attempt to meet those two aims.

**Do you think it made a difference, or do you know if it made a difference, in what kind of courses people took or what kind of courses had to be offered or were offered or...**

Well, yeah, they had to, I think there was a fairly substantial expansion of courses in some areas. And I would say that, I don't know, I mean I don't know if I can remember when this transition occurred

but I think there were, sort of, more traditional at least, courses that were tending toward the more traditional disciplines. Early on, you know, liberal education was a very sort of, in some ways, a very avant-garde, it took a very avant-garde approach in the sense that there were very interesting approaches to teaching liberal education through the arts. And I think that still continues, but at that point there were a few just very interesting, quirky, wild courses, you know. And I think—so that over the years there's been a great expansion of courses and also more of a sense, perhaps, of disciplines that, you know, the traditional disciplines with coordinators heading those areas and so on. And, you know, it sort of almost had to develop, in some sense, that way because the school grew so fast and in some way of organizing things that made sense. But I think also a certain amount of experimentation and creative collaboration, both on the parts of students and faculty, has been sacrificed because of that. And I think maybe over the years, over time, I think there was developed a kind of separation of the majors departments from the gen ed area that wasn't as visible, at least to me, when I first came into the College. It seemed to me that they were much more integrated and people really committed to taking, really committed to taking, you know, creative approaches. So it's something that is, you know, the College is wrestling with right now. And, you know, it's a good debate to be having because we have to—we have to find a way of, I think, getting back to that really, sort of, integrative approach that really values both the majors department and the gen ed.

**Tell me a little bit about, I'm curious about the mission of the College. One aspect of the mission of the College is liberal arts and arts and communications, but there are a couple other aspects. Could you talk about those a little bit?**  
Well, I'm not sure what you mean. You mean some specifically?

**Well, there are a couple things, a couple things stand out. One is that this is an open enrollment institution. So I guess what I'd ask is, what has that meant and has it changed at all in your experience?**

Well, open admissions was, you know—I soon came to realize when I first arrived at Columbia—was incredibly important in generating the kind of diversity of students that I had in my classes. And in giving an opportunity to students who had been historically underserved and who, you know, deserved an opportunity. Growing up on a farm I came from a very working-class background. I was given some opportunities along the way through, you know, scholarships, whatever, to go to some fairly selective, you know, reputable, private institutions. I went to Tulane University in New Orleans, I studied at two English universities and at the University of Chicago. Those schools were very, you know, on the whole, fairly elite, you know. And I, I don't know if I was ever just particularly comfortable with the kinds of students that I was in classes with there. I survived, I did OK, you know? I managed to play the game. But I didn't really, I can't say that I ever really felt fully at home at those places. At Columbia, I really felt at home. I really felt that it was a place that had a strong commitment, social commitment, that, you

know, to people and not just to causes; and certainly not just to fundraising. They seemed to be doing, you know, the right things: keeping tuition affordable, accepting people at whatever level they were and from whatever background, and then—at least in the department that I was involved with—really grappling with finding ways of engaging that diversity and helping them to, helping these students to develop. And it wasn't just a matter of open admissions being an invitation to come in and sink or swim. We were really, really feeling that it was our responsibility to find a way to help them succeed. And we didn't need to do what a lot of colleges and universities had done, which was to segregate the poorly prepared student from the better-prepared student. We were gonna, in some way, reflect the society in the classroom and then we were gonna work with that diversity to the best of our ability. We had a tremendous growth because of it then. I mean, growth has been the constant at Columbia.

We've had, what, thirty years or something where we've grown every year. As I said, I think we were something around fifteen hundred when I first came and had no grad programs or anything like that. And now we're, what, ninety-six or something like that and we have, I don't know, fourteen grad programs or something as well as a huge number of new departments and so on. So growth has brought with it great opportunities for the school. We only had one building then—what now, I don't know, a dozen now, thirteen, fourteen; I don't know what it is. And it's also brought, as everybody knows at

Columbia, two or three strains of problems. Those have to do not only with curriculum but with resources and so on.

In the last two or three years there has been more and more of a move to identify just how, you know, how much of a problem we have with under-prepared students. And there's been a much greater emphasis on pouring resources into serving those students. It's problematic, it's caused a certain strain on the College. It's very difficult to, I think, serve the ends of the arts and communications fields and departments where, you know, just what most students come to Columbia for, while at the same time pouring increasing amounts of resources into developmental education. It's put us in a real bind, you know? It's not an easy question to find a solution for. There's been a long and hard debate about it, but the problem is gonna get worse in the coming years and what we're faced with is really trying to think about creative solutions to it.

Having taught in writing programs here at Columbia for—I just finished my twentieth at Columbia—having taught here for twenty years in a program where we've had great success with writers of all sorts, from all sorts of different backgrounds, skills, levels, I have, you know, real difficulties with, with an educational approach that ends by segregating students. Whether they are, you know—well, let's face it, you know, you end up with classes that are gonna have a higher percentage of some groups than another, you know? More minority students are gonna end up in those groups just because of the population we draw from and the poor preparation that students get in some of the public schools in

this city. But I think that you can find ways of addressing the needs of those students in classes that are mixed and through a tutoring program. But that's not necessarily the way the College is moving and so we're fast, I think, reaching a crisis. As these resources get more and more scarce for the departments, it's actually gonna exacerbate conflict, I think, between majors departments and the rest of the school. So what we have to do is we have to really, I think, go back to the drawing board in some way and say... not retreat from the mission, not retreat from open admissions but some way really examine what we mean by it toward the end of saying, "Well, what can we do to preserve open admissions but still get, you know, the better prepared students; in some ways direct the resources toward those people who are coming here for the arts and communications fields and really are serious about it?" How can we also make sure that we do not shut out students who are talented in the areas that we are known for but who may not otherwise have the resources or whatever to get into, survive in other colleges? How are we gonna keep our diversity, you know, at the same time? These are all questions that we're gonna have to do a lot of discussion about and if we don't do it quickly, we're gonna get caught in a backwash of conflicts. I'm afraid, you know, they'll sneak up on us.

**Tell me about the students. Who are they? Who were they when you first came here?**

Well, Columbia was more, had a greater percentage of minority students, generally. We had...

**Was that true in Fiction Writing classes, in the classes that you taught?**

Yep, yeah. Now, keep in mind I taught, when I first came here I just taught Writing Workshops which were the, you know... so we saw students from every major. It wasn't until a couple of years later really, I don't think, that I started teaching Fiction Workshops. But, yeah, it was true, sure it was true in Fiction Workshops as well as in the Writing Workshops. I think the Writing Workshops were probably somewhat—had a higher percentage of minority students than the Fiction Workshops, but the Fiction Workshops themselves were very mixed. We had—and by far the largest minority group was African-American. And we probably had many more African-American males than now. We had a much smaller percentage of Hispanic students or other minority. Now the students are, you know, increasingly, I would say increasingly white, increasingly suburban, increasingly national as well as international. And the Hispanic population has been growing very rapidly. So while we have a lower percentage of minority students, generally, from when I came, and a lower percentage of African-American students than when I came, we have a much higher percentage of Hispanic students and it's been the fastest growing group in college, that as a group. So, and the Fiction Writing classes, the Fiction Writing classes continue to be mixed, very mixed, and I think it's really been our ability to take an approach that validates each person's own voice, cultural background, and subject matter and so on so that the students know that they're not gonna get shut out from telling the stories that they really want to tell.

It's the thing that really distinguishes this program from any other creative writing program in the country, I would say. So it's hard to find—it's easy to find workshop stories at other places, it's hard to find something that's just a workshop story here because we really emphasize the, kind of, individuality of each person's voice.

**What were the career goals of students when you came here and what are they today? Have they changed?**

I don't think that students were as career-minded, by any means, when I started. I don't know, I mean, I was coming back from, as I say, two years in California where I spent most of it out in the woods and then occasionally, you know, doing everything from teaching to bucking hay for farmers. So I wasn't as career-minded, perhaps, but I don't think students were either. They were a lot of first-generation college students and so there was a certain sense of, you know, among a certain group of them, as being upwardly mobile, rising expectations. But it wasn't until mid to late '80s that the careerist approach where they, kind of, took a foothold, I think. This is—I'm painting very broad generalities here. And the department, you know, always emphasized that the—has always emphasized this, emphasized it, that the skills that make for good fiction, creative non-fiction writing, and the others, you know, the skills that they're developing in classes can be practiced in the Story Workshop approach and so on, you know: reading, writing, listening, speaking, conceptualizing, abstracting, greater problem solving. That all these skills, relationship skills, all of these skills are things that they can use in jobs in a variety of areas. So we're always,

we've always emphasized this dual thing, doing the writing but also developing, being aware of developing the skills that, you know, help people in jobs. And people have ended up with a great variety of jobs coming out of this program. So I think that perhaps the difference is only one of emphasis, that early on they weren't as interested, necessarily, in careers but they were still getting the skills that allowed them to get jobs when they left. Now, probably more come in, more students come in, aware of the need to think about eating while they're doing their writing.

**Tell me about, what other aspect of the mission of the College is... Many of the courses, though clearly not all, are taught by working professionals working in their own fields. Any comments on that and how, if at all, that's changed?**

Well I, I think it's been a real strength of the school. It makes—in some ways, it makes the education, I suppose, more relevant. At the same time, you know, it may have a—there may be a couple of dangers. One is that students become too focused on careers too early rather than really thinking about just exploring and stretching themselves in a variety of areas during their college years. And secondly, of course, it's met—particularly in departments that don't do a lot of in-service work, and we do a tremendous amount of in-service work in this program—but in those departments where they don't do in-service work or don't do it in a very focused way it means that there's probably more inconsistency than structure. So, while the teachers know a great deal, particularly about very practical matters in relation to the discipline they're teaching, radio, television, whatever, it is also a problem

that they don't necessarily know how to convey it any better than the teacher who was a great researcher at the U of C that I might have had but who couldn't, you know, find a way to, you know, convey the information to us. It's two versions of the same problem. Now, many departments, a number of departments have gone some way towards trying to address that difficulty, you know, through their in-service programs or others where they do a very light touch if at all. And it presents some problems. I hear students complaining about it now.

**Based on your, OK, based on your experience here has your, has your personal vision of education changed?**

*(Laughs)* Oh, that's an interesting question. I could keep us going all night. I, I suppose that I, I think that Columbia, the mission at Columbia is even more important now than when I came. When I came to Columbia it was a kind of interesting, odd, offbeat experiment. But now it's—it's certainly still an experiment but I think in an age where we get a very sort of cookie-cutter approach to education at a lot of schools, and where forces from Congress—through the Department of Education, through the accrediting agencies—colleges, internal workings of the colleges themselves, are really emphasizing, emphasizing a very sort of standard approach, I don't know, for want of a better term, a very normative kind of approach; to some extent a certain, you know, in the interest of promoting consistency and accountability. I think Columbia has really had a difficult time, first of all, in staking out its very different approach to education and secondly, you know, it's had... it really needs to do that and continue

to do that. I don't know how to put it any better. Because it has to, you know—there have to be alternatives to that cookie-cutter approach, there need to be. And it's not just a matter of laying traditional education against non-traditional education. It's a matter of do we, how do we find ways and means to encourage students to grapple with the problems that they need to grapple with, you know, educationally, and think creatively about solutions. I'll just give you a quick example: I came out of the U of C and other areas. I tutored at the U of C and so students had, sometimes, an ability to develop wonderful skills. But often, compared to Columbia students who maybe didn't have those skills, those students did not, those students at the U of C did not—generally—have much to say. Students here, in some ways, are more rougher, are rougher or ill-formed or something, perhaps, seem to have less sophistication at times, but come up with incredibly wonderful insights and creative ways of problem solving and comments, insights about reading and other - writing, for instance - that are incredibly sophisticated, you know? It's that sort of excitement that really pervades the classroom...

**Have your feelings about this changed or...**

No, I've always been excited about Columbia, I've always really liked it. You know, even through some incredibly difficult and trying times at this College. I think the idea of the College, that Mike Alexandroff came up with, is brilliant and an idea that really deserves to be heard throughout this country; maybe not done the

best job of promoting it, but we need to present ourselves nationally as a, I think, as a model for what's possible in this kind of environment.

**Do you think Columbia's had an impact on other colleges, on higher ed. in general?**

You know, that, I guess that's, that's hard for me to say, I think increasingly as the reputation of the school has gotten out. I think it's probably had more of an impact, you know, but I think also, you know, because we are so different from what most places do we're always kind of fighting marginalization, you know. People look at us and they don't quite know what to make of us necessarily. And yet, you know, the reputation of the school has really spread, you hear people... When I first started at Columbia I was constantly having to explain what Columbia was and where it was and all of that to whoever I met from outside and that's no longer the case anymore, you know, especially in this area. Virtually everybody knows who we are.

**Has, do you think the College has had an impact on the arts or communications or, specifically, writing, writers?**

Well, I think it certainly has had, I think it certainly had an impact from the standpoint of training a lot of people who have gone on to make their mark, you know. I think right now, in terms of the writing program right now, we're kind of riding a crest here. You know, we have five, five present or former students who are gonna be publishing books in the next year. A woman has just, she was in a grad program has just published her, who has just done a movie script from a short story of hers that, this

movie will be, has just been accepted for the Berlin Film Festival. You know, we have a whole series of wonderful awards... last week Hair Trigger won a silver crown award, the latest in a whole series of awards from Columbia University's Scholastic Press Association. It is one of the top journals in the country, you know. Hair Trigger has won first place awards from three different organizations. There have been a lot of individual winners of awards, writers in the program, all of which we're very proud of, and in some ways I feel like things are just kind of starting to break for a lot of our writers and that we're really gonna have a period where—where I hope, anyway, we are—breaking out of the national scene here more. One of our writers, Don DeGrazia, who was a graduate of the undergrad program and the grad program, got his novel—which was his grad thesis—published with Jonathan Cape in London in January. He's on our full-time faculty now. And it's been contracted for a movie. And you know, I think if that movie gets made, you know, there are a lot of twists and turns between now and then but I think that will go a long way toward raising the profile considerably of the College and the department.

**Can you, you've talked about a number of events here. Are there other significant events that you haven't mentioned in your twenty years here?**

Significant events...

**In the life of the College or in the life of the department.**

Well certainly, certainly the most, well, probably the most significant event in the life of the department, at any rate, was the separation—in

1986 was it—of the Writing/English Department into an English Department and a Fiction Writing Department. You know, that was, that was a pretty—it was a difficult time for a lot of faculty in that department and it, it was...

program in the country and it's certainly very well, I think, thought of, generally. So we've been able to do some things here with writing that we're just not able to do with most...

**What was the reason for the division?**

Well, there were a lot of reasons, there were a lot of reasons for it. You know, I suppose the initial impetus was the disagreement, really between about seven or eight faculty and the rest of the faculty and the Chair over, over the direction of the department. And it—things sort of went from bad to worse over the course of a year and to a point where it seemed as though that was, a split was the best thing to do. The President, Alexandroff at that point, had actually ended up doing a very good thing in creating two separate purviews: giving the Fiction Writing Department the grad programs and the undergraduate major and making it, bringing it in some ways more in line with the majors in the rest of the arts and communications fields here while, at the same time, giving the English Department the comp program and those gen ed. lit courses. Those were—you know, actually that, in some way, clarified some things. We didn't think so at the time and it wasn't a happy time, four years ago, but we soon came to realize that we had an opportunity here that they didn't have at most other colleges and universities where writing's kind of taking a back seat all the time to comp and lit in the English departments. And so we have managed to capitalize on that in a lot of ways and we now have the largest, what I think is the largest, writing