

Sara Livingston

Okay. Today is October the 10th 2001, and this is an interview with Sara Livingston, Acting Associate Dean of Media Arts.

Is that correct?

That's correct.

Okay. If we could start by you telling us, when did you come to Columbia and what the circumstances were?

Sure. 1986, I had just graduated from a master's program at the University of Illinois. And Michael Neiderman, who's now the chair of the Television Department, was one of my instructors there. And he was teaching at Columbia full-time. And one of the courses he was teaching was a genre study course, and that was a course that he had taught me at U of I.

And he called me and said, "I'm not able to teach this class this semester, and you did very well in the class"—and, you know, we really had great discussions personally about it. He said, "I'd like you to teach it here, see if you like teaching." And I said, "Oh, God, I've never taught before, but hey, I'll try it." Because I had heard Columbia was one of these very laid-back places, with people of varying abilities. And they really encouraged me to try it, even though I wasn't a professional teacher.

So I was working full-time at the Chicago Access Corporation producing programs for the community, and I taught a night class here because I couldn't teach here during the day. And it turned out so well, that they asked if I would teach another one next

semester and could I teach one very early in the morning before I went to work. And that was at the time when the TV Department was running classes beginning at 7:00 a.m. From 7:00 to 11:00, then 11:00 to 2:00, 2:00 to 6:00 and 6:00 to 11:00. I mean, it was just like four-hour classes, four times. It was just packed in there.

So I said, "sure, I would"—I really enjoyed teaching and I had decided to do it. And then I taught the Analysis class, and I taught a Studio Production class. And while I was at the Access Corporation, I had started to teach a class on Studio Production there as well, because part of the Chicago Access Corporation was to bring the tools of production to the common person. It was their mission to make everyone a TV producer who had something to say.

So I was working in the community with community groups, and then I got to work with Columbia College students at the same time, and it was kind of like the same population. It was—we had a lot of older students in my Columbia class, and we had students of all ages and all nationalities and all languages at the Access Corporation, too. So they were two very compatible jobs.

I think it was in 1988, after I had taught two semesters, one of the full-time faculty members, Barbara Sykes, who I also knew from my past—I was good friends with her sister—was going on sabbatical. So Barbara Sykes was going on sabbatical, and the TV Department got permission to hire a full-time person for a year while she was

gone, because she was taking a full year. And I applied for it, and had a wonderful interview at Morris. Went out to lunch, talked a lot of trash, talked a lot about the business and about one item on my resume, which was that I had attended school in Barcelona. And one of—one of the schools I went to at Spain was the University of Salamanca, and he really was fixated on that Salamanca because he had read a novel—he's an avid reader, he reads everything he can get his hands on—and he went, "Oh, I read a wonderful novel about Salamanca. Tell me about Salamanca." So I told him about Salamanca, and they offered me the job. So I always tell my students, "You know, you never know what little quirky thing on your resume is going to pique your employer's interest." So I got a contract for a year while Barbara was gone.

And when Barbara came back, the department had grown, and they got permission for a full-time



position. And since I was there, I just kind of slid into that. So I went from being a part-time to a one-year contract to a full-time faculty member and have been here ever since. So that's how I got here.

And when were you appointed Acting Associate Dean and how did your responsibilities shift from teaching a full load to having a more administrative position?

Oh, well, the full—the Dean position is still—well, you can see I'm still wet behind the ears here. I've only had that position since September 1st, of this year. So I've been a full-time faculty member until 2001, September, and now, September 1st, I started as my administrative self, and it's quite different. I'm still teaching class in the Television Department, which I'm glad of, it kind of keeps me grounded and keeps me attached to the students, but it's such a different experience. I really have to kind of switch my whole way of thinking and my whole way of being to go into the classroom and then to go back to kind of solving problems. I'm finding that administrative work is really—it's the Bureau of Exceptions to the Rule.

Everybody calls—everybody calls, and everybody knows the rules, but they have this one extenuating circumstance, and they want to explain why they want to step outside of the boundaries, and it's very interesting. And everybody's got a very good case, and I think that's what an administrator's life is like, making a judgment on “Is this a worthy enough cause to make an exception to the rule?” So it's very—it's very different.

I'm trying to think of how—since it's only a month new for me, I'm going to have all of these probably naïve assumptions about it but, you

know, it's just kind of being a clearinghouse for people to check. They already—when they call the dean, they kind of know what they want to do, and they're just kind of checking it to make sure that this is okay. And I know Doreen, who is the dean that I'm helping out, really appreciates it when people don't just call up and complain, but call up and have a solution to their problem and want to just kind of run it by me. So that's a very interesting thing.

The other interesting part about being an Associate Dean is all the paperwork. Oh, my God—we're killing forests at the school. I cannot believe how much paper there is just to get a course to move from the experimental phase into the permanent phase.

So all the associate deans are in charge of keeping the catalog up to date and keeping the web catalog up to date. So all the changes—any time someone wants to make a three-hour class, a four-hour class or a change of prerequisite, I got a couple of pieces of paper, and I make the changes in the catalog, then I make the changes in the web. And then I collect all this material to send on to the Curriculum Committee.

So I've become what Jan Garfield used to be as the curriculum overseer. But Jan did it for the whole college, and I only have to do it for, you know, the eight departments that the School of the Arts oversees, so that's considerable. I don't envy what she used to have to do.

So paperwork, solving problems. And there are a few initiatives that—Doreen is such a great boss because she said, “Hey, is there

anything you'd like to make happen?”

What's Doreen's last name?

Oh, sorry, Doreen Barton.

Okay. And she's the—

She's the Acting Dean of Media Arts.

Media Arts.

So she has given me the opportunity to say, “Hey, I'd like to get this going,” and I can do that. And I've started my taking what happened on September 11th, this tragedy that kept us from meeting the first time we had—

I looked at that date, September 12th.

Oh, yes, yes, because we didn't come the next day. But I've started to have round-table discussions for the school—any faculty member, part-time or full-time, who would like to come and discuss what happened and how to—how to integrate the occurrences into the classroom. So we've had one meeting, and we're having some training sessions on how to take a hot spot in your class and turn it into a learning moment, so taking hot moments and converting them into learning moments. And we're going to start having a series of workshops on how to facilitate these discussions into class. But people have come and have different concerns about, you know, what is the job of the teacher—politically, personally, socially, heteragogically—what are we supposed to do with these events? So that was something I'm really happy to be learning on.

And I've got another project I'd like to start that I haven't done yet, and that's surveying all the faculty members and seeing what kind of project they're involved in and

making a database out of it so we can put people together to go for funding, try to get money for individual artists, producers. We've got all the media-makers in our school. And I know when I was a faculty member, talking to other faculty members, I always thought, "Can we get some grant here? Can't we get some assistance in getting grants?" So that's something as a recent faculty member, it's still in the back of my mind, so I'd like to get that going, too. And I think since the school is having a—what is it, a department of sponsored projects?—I think there's going to be some opportunity to do that college-wide, and I'd like to do something school-wide to feed into that. So that's another project that I get to do on top of my paper-work—ooh. There's gotta be a carrot with that big stick, you know.

Let's talk a bit about how you define your mission of Columbia College and how you see—and it might tie into some of the things you've already said—but how you see your role or your school's role in carrying that mission out, or accomplishing that?

Well, the two things that stand out for me in the mission are commitment to the community and our hope that our students will author the culture of our times. And I think the School of Media Arts, is very uniquely positioned to do that just because media is the current purveyor for culture. And I know that there are several classes that address that, address how we effect and kind of deal with the culture, what the media gets shown out in the world, not just in this country, but all over. And I think the social and community aspect of the mission is something else that we're in a very unique position to effect.

There's so many kids that come here who learn how to work all the equipment and, you know, learn the theory of film-making and video-making and writing, and then they have all of this beautiful skill, and then they don't have a message that they want to tell the world. And I think part of our job is to help them discover who they are and formulate that message, and then use the techniques and the skills that we've taught them in the classrooms to then disseminate and get that message out.

As a faculty member in the TV Department, we've done a few projects with OCAP, with the Office of Community Arts Partnership, you know?

Right, right.

And they've been very generous in helping sponsor projects. I did a project with the Cambodian community where we taught. Well, we had about—we had seven or eight kids that were video students, and seven or eight that were multi-media students. And we brought faculty in and had workshops all summer, and they produced websites and made videos about themselves and their families. And this was the precursor to doing a larger project with them, which is to kind of document their parents' stories of living through the Holocaust in Cambodia. And the Cambodian Association wants to have an archive of their own, and kind of have a Holocaust Museum of their own. So we started working with the kids first, who would then go to the parents and start asking questions, you know, "Tell me your story" kind of thing.

So we involved Columbia College students from Multi-Media, Academic Computing and the TV

Department in this. And a lot of them, even though they graduated, are still wanting to work with them, and still do volunteer there. So this is the kind of thing that I think our mission brings such richness to the student's life, as well as an education.

I just want to pursue one thing along sort of that typically in higher education, institutions of higher education are pictured as these kinds of islands, these oases, are kind of removed from the water. And that's certainly not the picture that Columbia faculty and administration see it. It seems—they describe it as very much a part of the urban, the Chicago fabric, that you can't separate the two. And obviously, you're speaking to that. But could you expand on that principal that you cited commitment to the community? Could you define community and how you see Columbia's relation to the community and what its community is?

Okay. Well, the first kind of—maybe they're concentric circles. And I think the first concentric circle is the Chicago, the City community. And I think we reach into the public schools and try to get students to come to Columbia for their further education. We have a wonderful program, which you've probably heard about before, the High School Institute, where we get people to come in while they're still in high school and start taking classes that will transfer and give them college credit.

We also have programs that I think are kind of selfless, because they're not asking the students to come here, but they're just going into the community and talking to grade school and high school level students and bringing whatever the

subject matter is into that classroom. I know fiction writing does that, I know they've made beautiful storybooks with students that are in, you know, first, second, third grade, and it could pique their interest to a writing career.

We have in the TV Department, in the Media Arts area, a program that I think Amoco underwrites. They give us—I think we've got about \$25,000 a year to bring high school students in from—there are six different high schools—and they come in and are making video projects, doing video projects about, you know, their families, their home, their community, and getting them interested in telling their story, whether they write it or film it, it's still their story, and it has had quite a bit of success. We've done that for the last—I think this is our third year doing that.

And that's completely separate from the High School Institute? Right, right.

Is there another name for it?

You know, I've only heard it referred to as the Amoco Project, because they're the ones that funded it. The TV Department had a relationship with Amoco when they had a pretty high-end facility where they did in-house projects for themselves. They stopped doing that, they donated all their equipment to the college, and their one proviso was "We want you to do something with the community with part of this equipment."

Do you know what year that was, by any chance?

Well, it was three years ago, so it had to be '99. So that—you know, the Chicago community is one area, and then I think out into the suburbs, we do have a—oh, what is

it called?—it's another acronym, and I'm probably—it used to be Chicago Area Media Educators Network. And it was not directly aimed at the students, but at teacher who teach media who—you know, people that had TV programs in their high schools. And it was citywide and suburban-wide.

So we would have teachers coming here who would then go—they would take classes here or talk about the latest technical things or the latest ways of teaching video production, editing. And then they could take that from Columbia into their own classroom. So we had kind of a teacher network going.

Another way that we reach Chicago public schoolteachers and other schoolteachers, which is another layer of community, the Educational Studies Program has, you know, a wonderful program. I think it's called Teachers—Chicago Teachers—I can't remember. I'm sorry, I can't remember the exact names of these. I can find out and call you.

I teach a seminar in Media Literacy to high school teachers. Because they probably—I think high school kids probably have a lot of exposure to media and don't really know how to kind of protect themselves from the images. So I have a—it's two weekends where the teachers come in and I show them examples of media manipulation. And this is, you know, gender bias, race, age—any kind of bias you can imagine—we talk about media images and how they affect the kids and all of us—not just the kids, but I think the kids are the most vulnerable to that. And that's another way that we kind of teach in the media.

Is that—that's a Columbia program?

Yes.

(Inaudible).

Yeah, I teach it through Educational Studies, because they have a Master's in Education Program. And I think if you are—if you have a degree in any subject and you want to teach in the Chicago public schools, you can come in and in a year you can have a master's degree and get a certificate. You don't have to have a degree in Education. So you just take your, you know, your history degree or your biology degree and go to this Columbia program for a year and get a master's degree and go and teach in public schools.

So it's really—it's a very successful program. I know they just got their re-accreditation last year, you know, the way we have at every ten-year—I forget what it's called.

Is that with the North Central?

North Central, yeah. It's their version of this, so that's another way. And, you know, I think Columbia reaches—I think they do quite well in the Chicago area, and I think our next step is to have more of an influence outside of our area. We are—we are, as everyone says who has come to visit us—we're one of the best-kept secrets in the Midwest, in the country, really, because what we offer here is kind of a secret. We have kept a lid on our little life here, and I hope that that's going to change. I know that with the restructuring, there are more people in charge, and there are more people able to kind of reach out. Faculty, I think traditionally, has had to do a lot of the

administrative work. And that means that you do your administrative work, and you teach classes, and you have very little time left over to do conferences and to do artwork.

And with this new structure, I think that we streamline things a little more and allow faculty to go out into the world more and tell people what we're doing, share what we're doing.

As a teacher, how do you bring that value of community into the classroom, if you could give an example—

Let's see.

—with students that are in the classrooms that don't join these specific programs or aren't participating?

I have a class called Individual Visions, which is a class that we just kind of formalized it because we had a problem with people not knowing what to do with their skills like I said before. And this class, the point of this class, is having the student target something they feel strongly about and then going after it as far as a subject for their video that they'll work on for the next couple of semesters.

So during this class, we just have them brainstorm about, well, what do you care about, what issues do you care about? And then we try to move that issue—if they say that they are very interested in animals, for example—then we try to hook them up with the Anti-Cruelty Society. Or the—oh, I'm trying to think of an example that has actually happened—with the Sierra Club, if they're involved in, you know, if the environment is something. Or if old people are an interest of theirs, you know. We try to

get them to take an organization and do research on them, see what needs they might have that might fall into the media area and see if they can help them accomplish one of their goals by using their own skills.

So this course kind of formalizes that. And I know that senior seminar does that at the end of the college career. The class that I teach, Individual Visions, does that at the middle of their college career so that they have time to work on something. So we try to get them to figure out what their values are, figure out who they are, what kinds of things they'd like to accomplish in their lives, and then tie that to a community organization or a person in their neighborhood who's in need somehow, and then make a media project out of it, you know, help them do whatever they want to do, whatever they have to do, for the organization. So that's—

That's a pretty good example.
—that's accomplished.

Yeah, that's—and it's not—I think all of the people in the TV Department, and I'll speak about the TV Department just because that's what I know the best. I know this is also going on in the Journalism Department, and I know for a fact it's going on in the Film Department. But most of the people teaching in the TV Department have their own personal projects going on in the community. You know, Ron Boyd has worked with the Uptown Theatre Group and has made a beautiful documentary. Michael Neiderman has worked with a public health group on the west side and made a documentary about it. Laura Litton works with the—

it's a network of adoptive parents, and is a research fellow at the Museum of—the Field Museum—and they do kinship projects.

You know, Barbara Sykes goes into the Indian community and spent the summer in India documented some of the goddess rituals that they do. You know, Bo has documented the Creole experience. I work with the Cambodian community. Tim works with Street Level. We all do this outside, and we bring that back into the classroom indirectly. Because we use our own experiences as an example of not only are we making beautiful work, but we're doing something for the world as well.

And students emulate that. So we have it kind of formally structured in a class where we teach them, "Here's what you do when you have an interest, you feed it and you work on it and you make your artwork and you serve the community." And indirectly, by just example, "Here's what we do with our spare time. What do you do with your spare time?" And I know a lot of our faculty members are activists in their own way, so it just happens—kids see it.

No, that's great, and I'm glad you were able to kind of list who so we have examples of what's going on right now within your departments and within the community.

I want to change directions a little bit and ask you a question, your reflections, on gender issues. It seems that with restructuring, that a lot of women have been put in more visible and higher positions. Would you agree with that, and

can you give some insight into maybe what has changed or what has shifted? Or is that something that you can't comment on?

Yeah, I think there was a deliberate—a deliberate effort to bring more women into the administration. I know that the President values that and wanted to bring more women in, and I think it's—I can't help but think it's a great idea. I think that the old administration was short on women and, you know, didn't have a perspective that included women.

Yeah, I think that it was deliberate, and I'm really glad, because we have a bunch of really strong women working here, and it was just a natural to bring them up. I don't know, is there—

No, one of the themes that has come up throughout the project is that it's in the past, and up until this point, been an issue that as progressive as Columbia is, there has this—you know, it's a male—

It still is, it still is.

—you know, or led by males.

Yeah, that's true. I know when I first came here, I think there was—I think there were two women Chairs, and that's it. And I know, you know, just from talking at the lunch—in the lunchroom—that those were pretty testosterone-heavy meetings. And that they weren't as, I guess, consensus-building as they have become since women were included more.

And I know there was an effort a few years ago to bring women into chair positions, and that was very successful, and I think that those meetings got a lot more cooperative. And then as, you know, with Caroline becoming the dean, was one of the first steps. Lya

Rosenblum was a key administrative person, but she was the only one. And then Caroline came and, you know, both of those ladies kind of blazed the way for the rest of us to be included. So, yeah, I think we've come a long way from the way it looked in 1986, when I came here. And it was all guys, definitely. I'm glad, I'm glad. Everybody's cooperating a little more now. If we could just get this in the national politics, you know.

To launch that initiative.

Yeah, okay.

I'd like to ask you about the students that you—when you came here—and maybe if you could reflect on what you expected or elaborate on that a little more. And then what you found and what you have found in the students in your tenure here.

When I first started, everybody told me that, you know, the students were the widest range of human beings that I would find. We would have people that were barely getting their GED and people that, you know, had excelled extraordinarily high in high school and college and were here only because this was the place to get the real technical training and hands-on training.

So I really thought, “God, I don't know what to expect.” I was thinking, “I'm going to have Einsteins and, you know, drooling idiots in the class.” And nobody drooled, I'll tell you that. The kids that seemed what would be considered the least prepared all had some other really excellent way about them. If they didn't write a sentence well, they communicated so well with pictures or with music that, you

know, it was just stunning. And some of the people that were traditionally prepared were way behind in that area.

So my first classrooms, it was just like I couldn't teach to any one particular group. I had to make sure everybody was with me the whole way and be checking. And there would be workshops for the faculty on how to have collaborative learning classrooms so that you could get triads of students together, and the ones that were more prepared could help the ones that were less prepared. And also, by that, saying that they wouldn't be bored, they would be reinforcing their own learning and be kind of sharing their expertise with the person that wasn't as prepared. And in those same triads, the person that couldn't write a sentence could help them figure out an artistic transition for the film that they were making. So it was a really nice kind of mixture, multi-talents and what does Gardner call it, “multiple intelligences,” that's the way. So that's what struck me in the very first few years I was here.

I find that people, students in my classroom, are more and more homogenous now. They're more and more prepared than the original classrooms I had were. We seem to be attracting a lot of transfer students who have all their—all their academics down—and we don't have to spend as much time thinking about “How am I going to get the student to write before I can get them to write a decent paper or decent script?” Everybody comes in pretty much prepared. I see that the achievement level has gone way up. There are still people that, you know, you have to give extra help to and send to the

Writing Center. But in general, I would say that the level of students and their homogeneity of the student body has kind of gone up collectively.

On that point, has that been, perhaps, at the expense of diversity, or do you still see diversity being maintained?

I don't see as much diversity as there was in the beginning, and I think that's too—it's a shame. I think it's too bad, because those really diverse classrooms, everybody's challenged, everybody's learning from each other. It's very easy to throw out a term and have everybody, you know, understand it. It's a challenge, not just if you're a teacher, but if you're a student speaking in class, and you have to make sure that everybody's with you when you use certain vocabulary or talk about certain concepts, or even TV shows or films that you assume everybody has seen. That used to be really, really hard, and it made me work harder as a teacher, but I like that, I liked having to stretch for making an analogy that everyone would understand rather than just throw out one that I always had used in class.

And I think people in the class had to learn how to communicate with a variety of people. Maybe in a business, it's—you know, we all kind of feed the mass media. And I think that kind of "let's shoot for the middle intelligence and let's shoot for what most people understand," I see that happening in the classroom as well. Everybody's kind of prepared and everybody's pretty much from the same culture, as it were. You don't have to stretch yourself to go outside. And I think that's too bad. I would like more diversity in the classroom.

I see fewer and fewer minority students in my classroom as well, which is, I think, a shame, too. And I think that's probably a function of, you know, grants drying up or people having to go to school part-time. It's getting harder and harder to finance a college education. And I know that when I first started teaching here, those grants were much easier to get, and now it's harder. And I think people are just not—people who need to work—are not coming to school the way they used to. I'm getting fewer and fewer students who have full-time jobs and go to school than I had in the beginning. And I think that's too bad, too. Columbia seems to thrive on diversity and, you know, if we become like any other school with the same group, same homogenous group of people, I think that the classroom discourse suffers on that.

Would you say then that that's one of the challenges that Columbia's going to face that's on the horizon, you know, their commitment to diversity?

Yeah, I think it is. I think it used to be a given here, and now it's something that we really have to work at. I've heard that the new president, Warrick Carter, is really committed to bringing in people from other countries, trying to get arrangements from—well, I know Japan, for one—but to bring in people who don't speak our language and who come from another culture. And I think that would be great. I think that would start to get back the old diversity spirit here at Columbia. But I think that bringing people in from foreign countries isn't as important as getting back the flavor of the Chicago area.

And from the public schools and minorities that's in our own communities?

Yeah, right, right. Yeah, we have to do that. I think there's some sort of recruitment and retention task force that's working on ways of attracting different people to Columbia than who already come here. And I think that one of their—one of their goals is to really reach into the public schools, not just for the same people that would come here anyway, but really go out and recruit. I hope that happens.

Let's return to the issue of restructuring. You talked about this—I don't know if you describe it as a new layer of administration that could take some of this—and maybe speak more to that and the restructuring process and what you think that would do to help the college?

Yeah, I think that we grew so quickly in the last ten years that we had the same people doing the same jobs and the same work. And instead of adding people and adding different job descriptions to the administration, that as new students came in, and where faculty came in, they just kept piling the work on the same few—it was literally, it's a handful of people that were running the school. And just from being in this job for a month, I can tell you, Doreen and I are both on the phone constantly, we're in meetings constantly. And this is just for, you know, seven departments.

So I don't know how Caroline and Sam and Bert and Mike did it all by themselves. I don't know how that they did it. I mean, as a faculty member, we always thought, "Why are they ignoring

us? Why aren't they doing this?" But now I see, I see why, because you just can't get to everything. I feel like we're keeping up with the difficulties and, you know, solving problems as they come up now. But I don't think—I don't think any five humans could have done this for very much longer without, you know, their heads exploding.

So what I see now is that there are now four sets of this administration, and they have divided the school into—what do we have?—say we have 10,000. So now, we have essentially four schools of 2,500, which is manageable, it's doable. You can handle faculty issues, you can handle student issues, you can handle growth and problematic issues for 250 students much more easily than for 10,000. So I think this is going to help a lot. And I know that the faculty, when there was a gap, the faculty just had to step in and do the work that an administrator or an administrative assistant, should have been doing. That's probably not solved just yet, but it's on its way to being solved, so the faculty can devote more of their time to developing their classes, bringing in new material for their classes, developing programs, writing grants, really supporting themselves and their efforts instead of pushing paper. And that, I think, was what was getting to a lot of faculty members, you know, people that are very committed to the school and they're frustrated because they can't do what they were hired to do, they're doing what there should be another person hired to do. So it was a mess.

As we add that or expand that administrative role that is necessary because of the growth of the college, are a lot of those admin-

istrators, are they from a teacher's—are you concerned at all about who's now in the classroom, or is that something that you see that excellence (*inaudible*) will continue, or can you comment on that?

Well, the administrators right now, Doreen and I, we were both kind of taken from the classroom. That's not true for the Art Department, however. The Art Department has Leonard Lehrer, who was hired as Chairperson of the Art Department, but when the restructuring came in, he was bumped to dean. So he wasn't taken from the classroom. And his associate dean, however, Jim McDonald, is from the Music Department, so he was taken out of the Music Department. The other school, Cheryl Johnson-Odim—

Sure, right, from Liberal Education.

Yeah, she was taken from the Chair Department, which meant that Steve Asma had to be pulled out of the faculty and pushed into the chairperson's position. The way I understand, is that this is a temporary arrangement, and that they asked faculty members to stand in for the year until searches could be done and, you know, administrators recruited from—by national search. And everybody understands that that's what's going to happen.

So for the year, I think it's a great solution. Because this is our transition year, and what better person to have in charge but a former faculty person who's been here for, you know, 15 years and knows all the people, knows structure, knows the processes and procedures and can really jump in and start working.

Steve Kapelke, who's the provost now, has got his sleeves rolled up and he just kind of dived in and started working. But he's going to need some time to get to know everybody and know the procedures and policies, and is doing an incredible job of learning that fast. But on the dean level, I don't think we could have afforded to have a new person at the top and four brand-new deans who would all be going, "Well, what do we do next? How did you do it before?" There needed to be this transition team, and I think that this was a great solution. And most of us who were tapped understand that this is a year appointment, and we're happy to do it for a year. And I think most of us are happy to be back to the classroom, too, after seeing the other side. Peeking behind that curtain and going "Oh, God."

Well, I think that's a good, yeah, behind-the-scenes peek. What do you think is in Columbia's future? Like, what are your hopes or what do you think—when you talked about it, kind of moving into a more of a self-promotional mode— Yeah, yeah.

— but where do you think it's headed?

Well, I hope that our faculty and students can get more national and international notoriety. I think that the things that we do here are extraordinary, and I think that it's a shame that more people don't know about it.

And I don't know—I don't know why I want other people to know about it. I mean, I don't think it's going to get us more money or—it might get us more students—but I think just kind of sharing these

positive experiences with the world enriches it somehow. And I hope that—I hope that that really can happen.

I know that there are plans to do a lot of outreach and plans to join national organizations that we haven't joined before. I know that there's an art organization that, you know, has conferences and gets on lists and faculty get called for for service projects and for, you know, speaking engagements. And if you're not in this organization, you don't—you're just kind of off the map. So I think that's one of our—one of our plans is to become part of these smaller organizations of college teachers.

I want to interrupt you for just a second with that. Do you have any ideas or insights into, perhaps, what the reluctance was for, if we could call it, the previous generation to self-promote and to go out?

I think it was just there wasn't time. Just seeing—imagining my job times four, you would just be on a treadmill. And you have to run as fast as you can to stay in the same place. And there's no running faster, because you can't run any faster. And there's not another thing you can add on. And I think going through an application procedure and an accredit—because you have to pay, I think—I mean, I have no idea what it costs—but I know there's cost involved in the thousands of dollars. And I know that there's an accrediting procedure that you have to go through. And that means that you have to have a team come and look and you have to prepare for that, and I think having the North Central come every ten years was as much as anybody could handle, besides just doing the day-to-day stuff, you

know. And there was no provision for this “let's just have someone work on putting us on the map.” There wasn't the time or the personnel to do that. And I think that now that we have more people and more time, and we have people that are coming here from other academic experiences—you know, Leonard Lehrer taught in another place and was the chairman of another Art Department. I don't know him that well, so I can't tell you exactly where he was. But, you know, Cheryl was from Loyola and had experiences all over the country. And Doreen certainly has had experience outside of Columbia College. And Steve Kapelke brings all the places that he was teaching at. So we've got more of a kind of cross-pollination.

And I know that in the past, most of our teachers and administrators were kind of home-grown. And we didn't get the cross-pollination because we didn't have people who had been outside of the farm, as it were. But now, we've got people who have seen Paree, and they want to have us join the rest of the world.

So I think that's—I think that's what kept us from joining these. And I think that part of the problem is solved with more people and a desire to do that. I don't think we could think about it. I mean, it was kind of like—I don't want to paint a horrible picture—but it was like subsistence living, you know. First, you've got to, you know, take care of the basics, right. You've got to eat and have a roof over your head. There's no going to town or, you know, painting a picture—forget it. You've got to just take care of the basics. And I think that's where we were for quite awhile, and I'm glad that's cleared in a way.

In Columbia's future, do you see it as continuing, the image of, say, alternative education? Or do you see it kind of leading the way in what it does and other institutions trying to emulate or follow? Oh, what do you mean by “alternative”?

Well, I think traditionally that this is, you know, open admissions and arcane communications that, you know, what you get at Columbia, you're not really going to find anywhere else.

Oh, yeah, yeah. You know, I'm going to talk about open admissions for just a little bit because I think that—I was on the Search Committee for the Provost. And not just Steve Kapelke said this, but almost everyone we interviewed said open admissions is a—it's operating in every institution in the country—Harvard, Yale, you know, all the big guys have some form of open admissions, because they'll take people and fund them, people that don't have as high of scores as possible. It's not just the crème de la crème that's going to all the Ivy League schools and, you know, all the great state schools. In order to have a diverse population, people choose differently-abled students.

So I used to think that Columbia was the only school that had people that came in here and really could read or put sentences together. But I understand now after talking to more people that that's a national problem, that everybody had this kind of open admissions, but they don't call it that. So I think that we could lead the way for—let's just be honest about this. We're having a great time, we're having—we're producing a great deal of beautiful work. We have students who are

excelling in all the fields that we teach, and we have open admissions. Let's just say it, and maybe more of these schools will start saying that instead of trying to be, you know, elitist's minds. But that's just an aside.

I think Columbia does offer a very different experience than any other school, any other school that I went to. And it has a lot to do with the faculty. It has a lot to do with who the people who are in the classroom. The structure and the, you know, the underpinnings, you can have the most gorgeous facilities that you can imagine, and if you've got someone who isn't a mensch in the classroom, what do you have? You've got window dressing, and you've got a creep in the classroom. And I've had a lot of crummy teachers in my time—not crummy, but just not engaged—people that don't care, you know. They don't know who you are the first week, they don't know who you are the fifteenth week. And I think what sets us apart and what we can be leaders in is our teaching, our teaching staff. We have an incredible faculty. I think that's our major asset. And if we can get word out on that, I think that will even overshadow the, you know, the great technical stuff that we have here. Yeah, we've got the biggest Abbott Lab in the world. We've got the biggest film school. We've got, you know, six buildings. I mean, whatever—all of the material stuff kind of falls away if you don't have the extraordinary people in the classroom. And they're not just academic people. They are people that do the work that the kids want to do. And when I mentioned before that all the people that I work on in the TV Department

were actively engaged, even though they're full-time faculty members, they're still doing things in the community, I think that is another place that we lead the country in.

Most schools, part of their tenure track agreement is that they must publish, and that means write a book or, you know, do presentations. And luckily, Columbia still values the non-written book. And so you can do a series of photographs and still get tenure. You can do a film. You can, you know, write an incredible news story, publish short stories or poems. These are the kinds of things that people come to Columbia for, students come to Columbia for. And we value that in our faculty, and we reward that in our faculty. And I think that's where we lead other places, and that's why Columbia's an unusual place.

So in the future, hmm, I guess if we get these fabulous people out in the world more, join the organizations, get them out there, that other places may see the value of the not-so-academic faculty member. That a Ph.D. is not all you need to be a winner in the classroom.

I think that's a good place to end, except if there was anything that you thought or that you would like to, you know, address. Something that's close to your heart or, you know, when you think about Columbia and your tenure here?

I think I really talked—I mean, I really think that
that—

Let me ask you this: Why do you stay?

Oh, my God.

Not that, but if, you know, if you were going to explain to someone why, you know, this was where you've made your profession?

I would say it's because of the colleagues here. I would stay because of the people. It's a very unusual, extraordinary collection of human beings who are all committed to education and to their art form. And that's something you just don't find.

But we do have fights. Everybody is still very kind and supportive to each other. After the fighting is over, there's always that "Hey, I really respect you." And it's this mutual respect and growth that's encouraged by faculty and students. And I think that goes through the whole institution because of that. I think that the students pick up on that and conduct themselves in a different way because of what they see in the classroom. So I stay because of the faculty.

Great. Well, Sara Livingston, thank you very much.

You're welcome.