

## K a r e n O s b o r n e

*It is March 25th, 2004, and this is an interview with Karen Osborne, Professor of English at Columbia College Chicago.*

**So I would like to start by asking you how you came to Columbia, what the circumstances were that brought you here.**

I moved to Chicago in 1986 after a year teaching abroad. And I had, my first novel came out, and it received some favorable attention in the press. And so the English department called me and asked me to come and teach. And I started teaching part time in '86, and then full time in 1987.

**And what did they ask you to teach?**

I started with Composition I and soon began doing a variety of literature courses, Composition I and II and a variety of literature courses.

**And what did you know about Columbia before you came here?**

Very little. I had taught at Illinois Wesleyan University from 1981 to '85, and I don't believe then I really ever heard of it. Except for a rumor that a guy named John Mulvany who had once been at Wesleyan, apparently before I got there, and I think I even heard the rumor that he went to some place up in Chicago. And that's about the only context in which I had ever heard it mentioned.

**What were your first impressions of the college?**

Oh, I thought it was a really cool place. I thought, my God, have I died and gone to academic heaven or what.

**Can you give some examples? Why did you feel that way?**

Well, believe it or not young gay and lesbian people today probably have no concept that this ever used to happen, but I had taught at places where it really was not okay to be out. And I was not able to be out. And I had always had to sacrifice my personal life for the sake of my career.

When I came to Columbia College one of the first things I remember, I don't remember what year it was but it was very early, they had (*inaudible*) sat there in the audience and I looked up on the podium, and there was a man who among other things said "we're having AIDS awareness weekend, I had wondered what I as a gay man could do to support it." And I thought Hallelujah, I am at the right place. And so that's one of the many things I loved about Columbia. But it's simply never been an issue here. There's so many gay people. But it wouldn't matter even if there weren't a lot of gay people here. I mean this is the kind of place where people are accepted for who they are.

**And have you felt that way throughout and you see that also continuing to be embraced?**

Very much so. I know as with any large population there will always be exceptions. There will always be one or two instances. I know we had a student in the dorms who apparently harassed. But I think that that's very rare at Columbia College. I think by and large,

certainly my experience and most people I know, the faculty is great. Both straight and gay faculty are great. Sometimes the straight faculty are even more out there championing our rights. And with students you do not get the numbers of students who are hostile that you do at other institutions.

**Well, maybe you can comment on that. What do you think that's meant to students, the atmosphere or the acceptance of sexuality at the faculty level, administration level? What does that mean to students?**

I think it means very similar things to them as it did to me, because if you're an artist you want to feel comfortable pursuing the content and the stylistic expression that is yours. And if you can't be who you are as a person and be in a climate where you feel that you're encouraged to express who you are, then you're not going to be able to do



your best work. And I think for our students this is a very nurturing environment where they know that they can be who they are, and that their voice will be heard.

**Okay. That kind of leads to my next question. Do you feel the same as a woman—**

Yes, I—

**that the opportunities and—**

I mean I think as statistics show everywhere women's salaries are usually behind, blah, blah, blah. I don't know if my salary is so much less than my peers with my credentials at other institutions because I'm a woman, or simply because Columbia generally doesn't pay as well. Certainly faculty salaries are not on par with what they should be at other—but I don't feel I have ever suffered because I'm a woman. I can recall one time when a former chair many years ago had said something to me along the lines of, well, I can't give you a raise this year, I had a faculty member buying a house this year. And I thought to myself, oh, it's never occurred to him that perhaps, you know, a female faculty member might one day wish to own property as well. Where does he think I live. But that was an exception. I mean, and I don't know that that had anything to do with getting small raises. But I would say by and large, look at (*inaudible*), and look at some of the outstanding women they've had here. Columbia is not perfect by any means, but I think it's better than most.

**Can you describe some of your first impressions or what the English Department was like when you got here?**

Well, I was hired in by Phil Klukoff. He was the one that

offered me a full time position when one became available as a replacement faculty. And then later it became permanent. And Phil was new, and I was new. And so it was a new department. And everybody there was new to me, you know, pretty much. And at that time in the early years of the English department I think we felt Phil provided excellent leadership. I always have respected many of my colleagues. For example Paul Hoover has been a real inspiration. Tom Nawrocki has always been an outstanding writing teacher. And his colleagues will tell you, you know, many encounters they've had. His former students will tell you that. So it seems, it has always seemed to me to be a very sort of liberal, with-it, friendly and accomplished faculty. I don't know if that answers your question.

**And did you have any, was the dissension that had, the split within the department which preceded you, did you have to deal with any of that, or was there kind of a hangover from that, or was it kind of—**

Since I was never personally involved in that, I never taught in that other department, I think the only consequences for me were the fact that, was the fact that fiction writing students would be told not to take certain courses. And so if I happened to be assigned those courses I noticed that. And once in a while I noticed some not very friendly behavior, but by and large, no. By and large, no. I try to take people as I meet them.

**How has, or what ideas about teaching did you bring to Columbia, and have they changed, or how have they changed (inaudible)?**

Well, I've always been very much inspired by such statements as (*inaudible*) teaching is an act of liberation for student and teacher. So I come out of that kind of pedagogy. I was a grad student at the University of Denver, and I was always very much teaching a wide variety of diverse text. And then when I went to a more conservative environment, sometimes I found students way back in the late '70's and early '80's in the small towns did not always like being asked to read Alice Walker and other writers which we take for granted, you know. But I was teaching her a long, long time ago.

And so when I came to Columbia I just felt like, wow, here's the right place for me. Because it seemed to me that the whole institution embraced what had always been my own teaching philosophy, the commitment to open admissions, the commitment to diversity, the sense of radical empowerment of the individual, regardless of their background. All of that really, really appealed to me, perhaps partially as a southerner as well. I, you know, liked to see a place where there was a wide range of people. My high school was a big high school and it was integrated, and I thrived on that in the south. And I think we need more experiences like that rather than less. And I'm kind of disappointed in Chicago as a southerner because I thought it would be a lot more with-it than it is in terms of its race relations.

**Do you, maybe you could speak a little bit more to your feelings about open admissions, and do you worry that it's threatened either by costs or policy?**

Well, Columbia, you know, has always had its problems. And one of the major problems is—first we have to acknowledge Columbia's heart has always been in the right place, and still is. This institution has a great heart. The problem is it has not ever really had sufficient financial resources, you know. And that's becoming more and more of a problem, even though we're making progress on that. But it's never had the kind of endowment that would allow it really to be able to pursue its mission without other impingement's, things impinging on it. And so we are still so dependent on tuition. And at the same time we have had such tremendous growth that we face real problems in trying to address our student needs, provide support services, provide the technology, provide space. But we don't have a lot of ready cash to do all that with. It's not tied to tuition. That's a major problem. And I don't think the college has changed its commitment to open admissions. I think the financial pressure that exist in terms of people's lives and in terms of the proportion of income it takes to pay the tuition that we charge is making it difficult for many, many students to afford to come here.

**Can you talk a bit about some of the courses that you've designed and taught, maybe your favorites and why you've enjoyed teaching them here?**

Some of them I brought from other schools where I've taught, so they aren't only things I designed here. But—

**Or introduced here.**

I did, yeah, I did introduce a course called Southern Women Writers here, which I teach periodically. I haven't taught it in a few semesters. And that's, you know, always had wonderful students in it, and I've really enjoyed teaching that here. I have proposed and taught a couple of seminars in more recent years, the Dickinson seminar and seminar on Virginia Woolf. And those were both very solid and rewarding experiences. And I believe I'll do the Dickinson seminar again. The Woolf seminar, the enrollment was kind of low. And I'm not sure how eager I am to take—I don't like waiting until, you know, the last day of registration to know (inaudible). Whereas Dickinson filled, so, you know, I think maybe there's more interest in that.

I've done a variety of courses on Native American literature. I had done a version of that in another school. And contemporary Native American novel I actually created while I was here, because there was so much advanced work in the novel that you couldn't possibly include it all in one class. And that's been something I've really enjoyed. I've taught a lot of other things, but I can't take credit for creating them all.

**What really interests the students in some of those successful courses? But what do you think it is that the Columbia students want and are excited about?**

They're good students, and like good students everywhere they do want to learn both, you know, the traditional stuff. They want their

academic scholarship. But I think the Columbia student is special because they really want the opportunities to be challenged creatively. And they want to see the connection between what you're teaching them in terms of content that's already been produced by other artists and their own developing aesthetic as an artist.

And so in the Dickinson seminar for example I had them do academic papers, but I also had to do a creative project. This was something that I had developed when I was doing the intro to lit course. I was coordinator of intro to lit when we first began that. And I had been very inspired by our colleagues, Pam (inaudible) and Ann Hanson and others who had done these wonderful linkings of scientific material with getting students to express visual art in response to them, et cetera. And so I borrowed from them and others this notion of let's have them do something in their own field. And so I've been asking students in most of my literature classes to do that sort of thing. And in the Dickinson class, since a number of them were poetry majors a lot of them really were able to explore their own aesthetic, study her poems. See whether they were influenced in any particular ways or whether there was a connection between Dickinson and a poet that they admired. And we got some very good work out of that class. So that was very exciting. And I think the ultimate goal for most Columbia students is how is what they're learning about the field going to help them in their own cultural productions.

**When we look at the student population, has that population in your experience changed? Could you describe them when you first came compared to today?**

I don't think they've changed all that much. They were always very creative, energetic, sometimes eccentric, you know, diverse. I mean and I love all those things. And I think now, you know, they're just as creative and energetic, and perhaps just as eccentric as they ever were. Or perhaps I'm developing an immunity to noticing to eccentricity after being here. Perhaps I'm the eccentric one now. I don't know. But I think they were great then, and I think they're still great.

**Since you came here, how has teaching at Columbia influenced your work?**

I wouldn't say it's influenced my work, but I would say that it has provided the kind of liberal atmosphere in which I feel no constraints as to the content of my work. And as a lesbian novelist this has been very, very important to me. I feel free here to write whatever it is that I am called to write. And I do not have to worry about professional consequences at my college. And that may seem silly now in 2004, but I did not have that feeling in 1979 and 1980 when I was first out there teaching.

**Well, yeah, I think that's an issue that men, young men and women still face in their own institutions or—**

Maybe, although I'm hearing such wonderful stories, even places where I used to teach, that that's not an issue now. I was just there like 20 years too early. So you may be right. Certainly I do hear this when I go to conferences, like the

NCTE where we have both secondary and college. And there are wonderful, wonderful teachers out there who, places like even in California who cannot be free to be who they are. And they're doing very important work to educate the public around them, and they are at much higher risk for professional consequences.

**Can you talk about some of your activities and participation in organizations outside of Columbia?**

Let's see. Fairly recently I served for a couple of years, a year and a half or so on the board of (*inaudible*). And that was one of the saddest things toward the end because we were one of many arts organizations that finally had to close down in this rough economic period. But it was a very rewarding experience to serve with—

**What was that organization?**

It's an arts organization that was based in Oak Park. And I first got to know them as a writing teacher. I used to do advanced novel workshops for them. They were a community organization that offered mostly writing workshops, sometimes other kinds of workshops for people who, you know, didn't want to take them for academic credit but wanted to, you know, get involved. And it was a wonderful group. And they sponsored readings and they sponsored lectures and things and a review literary journal. So they did all kinds of good things. So I was on that.

Years and years ago I was in the feminist writers guild. I was on the board of a couple of a presses. I

founded a couple of presses. A couple of colleagues of mine in the English department, one of who, Fred Gardaphe has since moved on, but George Bailey, Fred Gardaphe and I founded City Lights Press years ago and brought out three anthologies of Chicago fiction by writers that we thought were important. And the idea came to me riding the train. I used to ride the train to Oak Park when I was first dating my girlfriend. And I had this thing with *West Side Story* was in my head. So that was one of our titles.

But Fred had been teaching Chicagoan lit, and George and I used to (*inaudible*). He was, Fred was complaining about a textbook. And I said, well, why don't, why don't you just do your own textbook. So we all kind of got together. And I knew a lot of writers and Fred knew some writers. And so we just, we were crazy. But we did it. It was fun.

**And I know you've remained very active in conference participation—**

Yeah. I'm hoping to cut back a little on that in the future. Especially when you get told, you know, we can't afford to send you to—I mean there's just that climate of don't do things because we don't have the money that kind of puts a squelcher on your desire to even try. When you know you're only going to be funded for one a year, what's the point of proposing more than one paper. But yeah, I've done a lot of that, a lot of papers at conferences. A very good way for me to develop ideas that sometimes later I turn into published essays. And it's a way to stay in touch with others, to learn from people outside of our area.

**How do you balance your personal writing and publication and teaching, and your responsibilities with Columbia?**

It's very difficult with the excessive course load we have. Those of us who are teaching courses with a high degree of writing and a lot of academic preparation especially, four is simply too much. It's exhausting. You have no personal life. You have no free time. It's not a very happy situation, especially if you're not adequately compensated. It's very difficult. I think, you know, it's time for the nine hour course load, and has been that time for a long time. So you do your best.

**And do you have to teach in the summer, or do you write—**

Sometimes I have to teach in the summer if I have expenses that I have to cover. Usually I try not to, but sometimes I have to if I just need the money.

**But if you're very prolific at your production of, whether it be papers at conferences or publications, I mean is that something that is kind of constant tension, or—**

I mean I will always want more time to write. But I love teaching. So I never, I never am successful at putting my writing first because teaching is an emotional need, you know. You feel that your students need your best energy in the classroom. And teaching is one of those beautiful but bottomless endeavors where no matter how much you put into it you always feel like you could continue to spend time on it and continue to put more into it. And it's very, it's impossible for me to do teaching anything less than 100 percent. So it always comes first.

So I have no one really but myself to blame for that because I will go to my grave probably known more as a teacher. And that's, I'm okay with that because I think that really is probably one of the most noble callings that there is. If you really are a good teacher then you have really done something. And I wish I could put my writing first. I know people who can. I know writers who are much better at turning off the teaching and turning on their own writing than I am. But I'm not successful at doing that. My teaching comes first.

**Maybe you could define what you feel a good teacher is.**

Oh, boy. There are so many different types of teachers I think it would almost be impossible to say exactly. My own views, one of the most important things of course is to create an atmosphere where the students feel that it's their class, where they feel that whatever they are exploring or whatever they want to ask or learn or try out can be done without feeling intimidated. I think I'm kind of intimidating sometimes in my intelligence, or people tell me that. So I've worked really hard to use self-deprecating humor and to find creative ways to create a very safe atmosphere for the students to try things out. And I tell them, you know, I ask stupid questions all the time and I tell them silly things that I do so that they know, you know, I'm not perfect.

The other thing is you need to accept every answer. If you're a teacher because you believe you know the right interpretation of a text and you're not happy with

your students because they don't give you that interpretation then I think you're a bad teacher. That's not me. Sometimes my students are frustrated at me because I will offer them a variety of interpretations or encourage them to come up with a variety of interpretations. And they want me to tell them which one is the right one, and I'm not comfortable with doing that. I believe in diversity of interpretations and using your best evidence to support your own analysis. And you may not persuade the other person to change their mind, but you may get them to seriously reconsider the evidence. And that's the kind of teacher I try to be.

For me school is, I guess it's really a sort of, hopefully a sort of escape, temporary escape from the violence of the outside world where you're free to actually think and dream without punishment. That isn't going to happen elsewhere.

**When did you first know or decide you wanted to teach?**

I don't think I decided. I think it was decided for me. I applied to a graduate program at the University of Denver. And the next thing I knew I had a letter not only accepting me but telling me I had been awarded a teaching assistantship and that I would be teaching a class that fall. I was 21 years old. I had completed undergrad school in three years. And so I found myself in the classroom, and I loved it. And I guess my students liked me. And I got all these great—and they used to publish the student evaluations. So, you know, I had these senior faculty coming up to me and saying, oh, you're the dynamic exciting one, you know, quoting these eval's at me that they read.

And so I was very fortunate that, you know, teaching was handed to me in a way. And I discovered that I really loved it. And I've been doing it ever since.

**Do you think you can teach creativity?**

No, not really. Yes and no I should say I guess, because I don't mean to imply a pessimistic view. But I tell my writing students I cannot teach them—writing is not something that can be taught. But it is something that can be learned. And there's a huge importance in that difference. The writer has to accept the responsibility and the promise within himself or herself that he or she can learn the art of writing. Mostly through hard work, mostly through hard work, and mostly through courage, the courage to face what needs to be revised, and to take risks. And I give workshops on taking risks and all that kind of thing. But I as a teacher cannot teach someone to be a great writer. And my students who have gone on to do great things as writers, I do not think it's because of me. I think it's always the student. And if you're lucky as a teacher you haven't stood in their way. You haven't hindered them in any way.

**But do you think that you help them get (*inaudible*)? It sounds like you're saying they have it within them.**

They either have it within them or they have the desire within them, and they are able to earn a measure of accomplishment through their pursuit of that desire. If they're motivated to pursue the discipline and the skill and the insights and the risk taking and courage, all of that, then they can achieve. Almost

anyone can achieve it I think. I really do think it's the desire to do it that will get them through it. And I don't care if they're having trouble with sentences or whatever, we have a wonderful writing center. If they have trouble developing ideas the writing center is great for that. I can work with any writer at any level. But if they're going to go further than the basic level they have to have a strong desire to do so. There are some exceptionally gifted people that can do it without even desiring to do it. They're the lucky ones.

**Maybe you can speak a little more to that, about that idea of working with a writer at every level. That's an issue that teachers at Columbia face. They have very well-prepared students and very ill-prepared students in the same class. How do you address that issue?**

It is always a challenge. And if you try to create your classroom as a community you involve the students in helping you teach the class, to teach themselves and each other. So I really enjoy small group work, work in pairs. And I become one of the participants. If we have an odd number I become one of the pairs, you know, and I'll write whatever they're writing and do the peer review and all of that. And I think that is invaluable, because the student who is less proficient often can hear the same insight or guidance from a fellow student in a way that reinforces it much more effectively than if you the teacher, the authority figure tries to tell them that. And I think it's good for the student that doesn't have to work so hard, that has always taken their

ability for granted to sit down and explore writing through the eyes of a student to who it does not come easily. Because the more advanced student then gains a deeper appreciation for what they have and how important it is not to squander that gift. And also how important and how rewarding it is to share that ability with others, and what a difference they can make in someone's ability. So I think getting the students involved in the teaching and learning as active co-creators is one solution. It's not the only solution to the whole thing about different levels.

**You mentioned the writing center. How has Columbia done in, the college in serving those students through its open admission policy that aren't as proficient?**

I used to have to fight those battles pretty hard. And one of the things I was going to talk about on your list was the most important event or whatever. And I was going to bring up the NCA self-study of '98 and '99. And also in terms of what I have done at the college or whatever. That self-study—and we're going to be up for another one before too many more years. And Ann Foley really did an outstanding job of coordinating the entire thing. It was a different climate at Columbia then. It had begun to change a little bit to be more supportive of actually fulfilling its mission.

But I can remember from when I first came here until that self-study terrible, terrible resistance on the part of the administration to doing anything more than allowing students to come here and give you their money. They did not care whether those students sank or

swim after they were here. And those of us who had pledged our hearts and our minds and our passions to the education of a diverse, open admissions group of students felt morally outraged for years that we should even have had to fight those battles. It broke our hearts. It made us angry. It made us frustrated, because we couldn't understand the resistance. And a number of people, people in my department also, people like Mark Kelly, I mean we have a lot of heroes around this college, very, very, patiently, persistently, courageously worked and worked and worked. And Mark Kelly is wonderful, we could use like ten people of him. A number of these people worked very patiently and persistently and courageously to try to get the college to provide the necessary support services for these students who were coming to an open admissions college who had not been adequately prepared to succeed in college. And so finally—and we had these battles during the NCA thing as well. And our retention rates were abysmal.

I was on the self-study steering committee. I was chair of the criterion task force. These were huge demanding committees to be on. And they were very difficult because you could bring up the most logical thing, like, you know, it might help retention if we actually paid some more attention to freshmen. What a concept. And to be shouted down or, you know, waved away, you know. Year after year we've been, you know. I certainly wasn't the first faculty member to bring these things up. My colleagues, Mark Withrow, people like Jeff Shiff had been

fighting these battles for years. And to get freshmen to actually take, you know, Comp I early instead of waiting till their senior year, those kinds of things.

So the writing center had some initial support. It was not the problem. But to get a reading center was very difficult. To get the kinds of things we have now, like Conaway and the freshmen center and freshmen seminar, all of those things are wonderful things. But they came about after years of fairly ferocious battles that should never have had to have been fought. And people would come to Columbia, and I would have no idea that they'd ever been (*inaudible*). They come in now. They see all these marvels, you know, and they're very impressed. And I'm glad they're impressed. But it took a lot out of a lot of us to have to spend our energy doing that. We could have been spending our energy doing other things.

**Why do you think there was such resistance?**

I don't know. I don't pretend to know that. I can't even speculate. I think more highly placed people than I might be able to speculate. There may have been a misperception about costs and benefits. I remember that the word remediation used to just set people off. And I think, actually now that, now it's coming to me. I think that there was a little bit of misinterpretation possibly, and possibly very well intentioned misinterpretation. There had been a couple of studies that had said certain kinds of remediation had been proven ineffec-

tive. And some here over generalized from that to think that under no circumstances could it ever be effective.

What the studies had shown I believe, if I recall correctly was that students at a certain level that needed three or four semesters worth of remediation would not be successfully remediated. But it did not prove that students who only needed maybe one or two semesters of work. And I don't even want to use that word. Assistance, academic assistance. And so I think there was just a dismissal of the concept as being something that would cost money that wouldn't do any good. That I think was probably as hard as this is to believe a sincerely held belief on the part of some administrators. And I think the writing center has proved them to be wrong, and I think and the reading program to some degree.

Certainly the bridge program has been a tremendous success in improving our retention rates. If you pay attention to students, if you give them the additional attention they need, if you work with them on their study skills and their study habits and do all of those things, they can learn what it takes to succeed in college. But if no one ever tells them, by the way—like no one has ever told most of my students before they come here part of college means you need to budget your textbooks. They don't know that it's going to cost them all this money to buy textbooks. We still have a long way to go on that, providing alternative textbooks, even though some of us do have books in the library, et cetera. But students today do not know

the expectations of them at college, and we need to work harder at teaching them that stuff because that is survival skill. And I think the bridge program really does do that. It does acquaint them right before the semester with what's going to be expected of them. It's a long answer.

**No, no. I just remember President Duff saying, well, some college is better than none, you know. That even a little college. NCA doesn't buy that.**

**No?**  
NCA will not reaccredit you if your retention rates are poor. And by the way, I want to add the great success story we are. We fought these terrible battles during that whole process, but it was actually a healthy and excellent process in the long run. Because as a result of that we had an outstanding self-study that was praised by NCA precisely for its self-critical nature. We had to say things like, well, our retention rate, there's no way we can, you know, ignore that figure, okay. And those of us who didn't want to write just a P.R. document got in big trouble for not writing a P.R. document. But we were vindicated in the end because the study was praised. We were reaccredited.

And through the ongoing efforts of many, many people at the college our retention rates have dramatically improved. We are a better college now. Students come here and are more likely to stay here now, and are more satisfied with the educations they're getting. And the collective effort that has come as a result of all of these discussions

about what we're doing as a college, et cetera, partially inspired by the stick of NCA I think has been tremendous for us. And so now we don't have to spend our time trying to convince people that you do need to provide services to help students. That's a given. People know that now and they accept it.

**Any other events while you've been here that you would want to talk about?**

I mean I think the AIDS awareness thing, the fact that Columbia did it earlier than most places did. And the fact that we had high level administrators who participated visibly.

**When was that year? Was that the first year?**

That was probably '87 I would guess, '86 or '87. I mean it was early, early. And I lost my best friend to AIDS in 1987. So it meant a lot to me. He was my roommate when I first came to Chicago. And it meant a lot to me that I was at a place that would talk about AIDS, talk about what we could do about it, and have gay administrators who would be visible without—we also had Hollis Sigler as an internationally accomplished artist, famous in her own right, but also someone who was willing to get involved with the gay and lesbian students. John (*inaudible*), someone else who has passed away since, someone who was willing to get involved with the gay and lesbian students. So many talented people at this college in all areas, and people who have been willing to be who they are and to show students the ropes, both in terms of their professional goals and in terms of being out there as gay and lesbian people.

**Could you too then talk about, do you think that the college is closer to fulfilling its mission, or how would you define its mission and if it's successful in that mission?**

I think the mission is very well-defined in the mission statement. And I think the college has always been pretty successful at that mission. I really do, despite whatever, you know, issues that have come up regarding support services. I mean I think the college has always really tried to empower the students and to encourage them to explore their own creativity and to find their voices, and to nurture them. I think in some ways we are doing a better job now. I think we have grown in a lot of really good ways. I think that we are a very strong college now, both academically and artistically. And I think that's good for both sides, good for all of us.

I'm primarily a creative writer, but I like to do some scholarship too, you know, and I like to learn. And I think we have tremendous resources on our campus for any discipline you can imagine. I think the college is doing a pretty good job of fulfilling the mission. I do think that the finances and the tuition are kind of, we have to look at that. I don't know if it's going to stop us from doing our mission. I wouldn't go that far. But it's an issue.

**Well, you mentioned too that you like to do scholarship. And correct me if I'm wrong, but you are very interested in pedagogy and teaching, and you've talked about that today already to a certain extent. But do you think**

**that other institutions that are not arts schools could learn something from Columbia, and what you've learned here, how you feel about teaching?**

Yeah, probably, probably they could. I mean I think, I think some of the ways in which we integrate the different disciplines are productive things for other colleges to learn. I did present at the conference on liberal education and the education of artists in New York, and a number of Columbia faculty have presented there. And so I think we are very well positioned to share some of our success stories with integrating disciplines with other schools.

**Could you give an example or two of that, of the integration?**

Oh, wonderful things go on. I mean in your own department you know you've got people, (*inaudible*) Miller and the work that she does with the images of the Virgin, and the cultural and historical and artistic issues, and the religious issues surrounding that. I think Ann Hanson and Pam (*inaudible*) and all those people who are doing these connections between math and the arts and physics and the arts, that project. I did a project in collaboration with some people, Wade Roberts and Maureen Seaton where we integrated text and graphics. But I'm thinking of another one too that, Gustave Leone, Pam, and some other really cool person, they all did this wonderful thing where they linked physics and space and time and the arts. And so I think those kinds of things are—we have people in just about every department doing those kinds of things, collaborating and working across disciplines.

**What has been your involvement kind of college-wide as a faculty member and the issues facing faculty, and of that service to the college, you know, portion of (*inaudible*).**

Far too much of that for too many years. I was on curriculum for like ten years, and I chaired it for a couple. And, you know, I was on way too many college committees. And the NCA thing, you know, with the double whammy for a couple of years. Last year I served as co-acting chair for a semester. I mean I've done a lot of that. And what I've enjoyed about that has been precisely college-wide is meeting other people in other departments. That's how you get to know other people. And I have such respect for colleagues in all the departments at this college because I've seen how intelligent and talented they are, and how ethical. I mean they, they do work on committees. That is something you can really be inspired by. So I think the plus side of college service is you meet great people. The downside is it's yet another thing in your day that takes you away from teaching and writing.

**Did you know Mike Alexandra?**

No, I did not. I mean only in passing. He did not know me.

**Who would you say then since you've been here are maybe some of the most important people that you have known (*inaudible*)?**

The big wigs?

**Well, not necessarily, no, but that you identify with Columbia.**

I mean Hollis I didn't know real well, but I certainly think Hollis Sigler was a major figure at this college. And she represented something really important about the

college I think. I think for me personally Phil Klukoff at the time I came in was very important. Certainly Lya Rosenblum was a very important person at the college, did a lot of important things for the college, was a model. I think she really tried to accomplish some important academic goals during her time here. I didn't really know her personally, but I respected her. Who else. There's just too many to name. I mean I mentioned Steven Russell Thomas.

Mark Kelly is still a hero of mine. He, if it weren't for him we wouldn't have even had that first little student center that we had at 623 many years ago. There was nothing. You didn't have the undergrad. You didn't have that. We had no place for a student to go get a cup of coffee, and there was nothing else around down here. So Mark Kelly just got that done.

**And would you, is that related to making Columbia more student centered? I mean is he—**

Yeah, definitely. He's done a lot of that. He's been a tremendous supporter of everything that requires support regarding students getting either the support they need or having the environment they need, you know, having it be a place where they feel like this is their college. And he has stood up for the importance of general education on a number of occasions when it really counted and lots of other things.

**We are—**

We're out of time.

**No, no.**

We should be almost out of time.

**We have a new, what I was going to say as I checked the clock, we have a new dorm opening up. What do you think if anything that, what impact that will have?**

We'll have more students residing. And the dorm is extremely—I don't know why they build dorms and then they charge them more to share a bed with three other, an apartment with three other people than a student has to pay when they go out and rent an apartment themselves. What are they thinking? Who is pricing these things? They're outrageously overpriced for what the students get. But if they can get students who are willing to pay it, you know. I don't get the math, okay. A student can go rent a one bedroom apartment cheaper.

**Maybe they think parents will fork over more money because they think—**

I don't know. I don't know where all that money is going, but the rates are higher. But I think, yeah, it will have more—but, you know, everybody says will it change the college. But I mean the percentage is not like 90 percent. It's only going to go from, what is it now, five percent or something. It's going to go to about ten percent.

**With the dorm of—**

Yeah.

**of students that don't commute.**

No, students—yeah. So it's still not even close to half, you know. The vast, vast majority will still be commuting. So I think it'll change, but maybe not so drastically as people think, maybe not in the first couple of years anyway. Because, you know, the vast majority work off campus and live off campus. But I think it will be good in terms

of the students who live here having a larger voice and working to get more things of a campus nature here.

**You mentioned the issue of the cost of books and trying to find alternative ways to make it more affordable for students, and then you just mentioned students working. How have you tried to deal with that? Because that's an issue that I think every faculty member has to face at Columbia. There's students that are going to school full time and working.**

Well, if it's literature, a lot of times I can put my links up and they can go read the stuff online. Sometimes you can't. Not everything is findable, you know. And it also takes a great deal of time to do that and to organize all those links for them, which is something Columbia has not seen fit to give me is time. But there are ways now, there are more ways than there were even ten years ago to try to provide the text, especially the older text that have been around for a while. But with newer material there really isn't a way.

I think we could have a budget for that college-wide that shouldn't have to come out of a department budget. Because in my department our chair treats that money like his personal fund and doesn't want to see it go out of the kitty. So I think the college could somehow devise a way to have, to purchase copies of books. I know the library does try to purchase copies of as many textbooks as they can when they know they're being used. They've been wonderful about that. But maybe the college could actually set up a fund so that we could almost automatically do that. Once or twice a

year have every department submit a list, and then check, find out which ones are in the library and how many copies. Because one copy may not be enough when you have hundreds of students. And to provide more copies on reserve or something. Or do more vouchers. I don't know what the parameters are, who gets the vouchers and who doesn't. I don't have the answer to that.

I mean all I can do, sometimes I can, I'll have an extra copy. Very seldom do I have an extra copy of a current edition, but sometimes I have an older one I can get the student. And I try to put links where they can find the same material online as much as possible. I don't have a solution. Reserve by the way, I find many of my students, they just don't want to go and read it there. They want to be able to read it from home.

**Right. And do you find, is it an issue with students finding the time to even do the work between working and their other—**

Yes, yeah, and that varies. But yeah, increasingly students, I don't know, when it's a class of 20 it's not at all uncommon to have 10 or 13 turn in something that's due on the day it's due. I do usually get them to do the reading if I give quizzes, which I don't really love doing. But I find that in my classes, I have one class that I've gotten in the habit of, they write the quiz questions every week. They come to class and they hand me quiz questions, and I pick out three questions really fast and I ask them. And most of them tend to do the reading. I don't know if it's because of that or just because, you know. But a lot of them don't do the reading, and a lot of them

don't buy the book. It varies from class to class. I have one class where I think they've all got the book. I have another class where only half of them have it.

**Well, let's then say where do you think the college is heading? And what are you most concerned about, and what are you most confident about?**

I think I've already identified. I mean I think many people are concerned about what we're going to do about trying to increase the endowment and the non-tuition dependent revenue sources. That's absolutely crucial. And that's going to take a really active board of trustees deciding that they want to do that. That's not something that their poorly paid faculty can do. They can ask us for money, but where do they think it's going to come from. And most of us do contribute to our scholarship funds and things like that to the degree that we can. So I think that's the main issue is trying to increase our non-tuition dependent revenue, so that we can take care of some of these other issues that have been caused by rising growth and all of the other things.

And I don't think we're in danger of changing our mission drastically or anything. I do think the finances are going to require some careful attention. And I think Dr. Carter is, you know, aware of that. And the trustees are aware of that probably too.

**And what are you most confident about?**

Oh, this is a great college. It's going to continue to be a great college. The students and faculty and staff here are lively, dedicated, energetic,

compassionate, talented people. That's not going to change.

**And would you, if you could now wave a magic wand and do something even to make it more student centered, or what would you do if you were in charge of making it more student centered? What would be the first thing you would bring on or change?**

I don't think a student center is going to change their lives that much.

**Student centered.**

I'm saying some people would say, oh, the new student center. Having a nice, new, state of the art student center isn't going to put a textbook in their hands. So I guess if I could wave a magic wand I'd have a huge scholarship fund and a huge textbook fund for any students in need that can demonstrate that need. And I would provide them with a textbook, and I would provide them with a discount on their tuition so that they could come here and stay here. And I wouldn't discontinue that after the first year. And I would make every scholarship renewable. All those freshman scholarships that they get, I'd make that renewable if the student is doing well. If I had a magic wand (*inaudible*).

**And what about if your magic wand for diversity as well, I mean how would you handle it?**

Well, I think what I just said would help with that, because if you will give tuition discounts to all students who prove that they are in need you will help those who are less advantaged. And that will help with your diversity. And if you provide textbooks for everyone who needs them, that will help those who come here from disadvantaged backgrounds be able to do well and

stay. Because they aren't going to fail the course because they don't have a textbook. That's a silly reason for a student to fail a course. I think we could take care of that pretty quick if we wanted to. And if they don't have time to go to the library because they're at work and they have to read while they're on the train or something, they need their own copy, or we need to provide it for them, et cetera. So I think that would help with diversity.

I think other things would help with diversity. Obviously we could continue to, I mean so many colleges do the same thing. We need to continue to progressively expand and do what we can to have a more visible diversity. And obviously we're doing something about diversity because I mean they just announced at the retreat that, you know, we have admissions working with Chicago public schools. We have these new scholarships. So there's some good steps going in the direction of recruiting students from Chicago. But without the tuition discounting I don't know how far we're going to get.

**Finally, is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would like to address or cover at all?**

No, I think you covered more than I thought we would. But I hope I don't get into trouble with anything I said.

