Okay. It is October 3rd, 2001, and this is an interview with Peter Radke, the Head Bursar of Columbia College.

If we could start, why don’t you tell us about when you first came to Columbia as a student in 1977.

My first semester here at Columbia was Spring of 1977. Columbia had just moved from its Olive Park location to the 600 South Michigan Building. It had just purchased the building that was the campus at that time for Columbia College.

I was fresh out of the Military. I had gotten out in September of 1976. I toyed with the idea of coming to Columbia at that point, but I thought for my acclimation, the better thing to do was take that whole sequence of months and get used to being back, actually, on land. I was stationed on a ship for four years. I lived in a very industrial-oriented society that did not require a lot of creativity, it was all male. And I knew there was going to be a lot of acclimation for me.

I’d spent four years living this type of life, and now I was back on land and I was back in a small town, I wasn’t seeing the wild world.

And it was best, looking back, to give myself that extra time. I came here to register. I remember—because I grew up in an Old World family—I wore a suit to registration. Registration at that time was in the lobby of 600 South Michigan where the gallery is today. The rest of it was up on the 7th floor, because that’s where the student lounge used to be. And if you go up there now, you would never even see the slightest indication. That’s where all the vending machines were. It was kind of like a big barracks room.

My strategy coming out of a military lifestyle was, I don’t want to be worrying about paying bills. So, I had saved a lot of money when I was in the military, had it socked away. Because my plan was either go to college and/or move to the City of Chicago. I was stationed—and it’s with more sadness now—I was stationed in Lower Manhattan, when I was in the United States Coast Guard from 1972 to 1976. I watched them build the World Trade Center. I was on Governor’s Island, right by Battery Park. I went from the small cornfield-oriented town to a city that never sleeps, in New York City. I had acclimated myself to that.

So one of my plans was either to go to college and live in Chicago and work part-time and start slowly, because I wasn’t sure, was I ready to go to college? My culture still placed a lot of value in work images, not just, “Hey, I have nothing else better to do with my life.”

Can I just ask, how old were you in ’76 when you got out of the military?

23, going on 24.

And I just want to make a note for our listeners that—the significance of Lower Manhattan and watching the World Trade Center, that it was just about two weeks ago where the World Trade Center was destroyed.

Well, even more specifically, it was a registration day here at the college. And I had gone over to the Wabash Building to see how our Bursar station was set up and ready to go. And when I came back to the main building, the televisions were going in the lobby, and when I turned the corner, it was at the same time the North Tower came down. And then I stood there in awe and horror, and what I realized was, my innocence as a 19-year-old kid, leaving home for the first time, being stationed in New York City, watching this monument.
being built. Because I was raised in a family where, for instance, one of our heroes as a family was Frank Lloyd Wright. We had a love of architecture. We had a love of engineering and technology. And the fascination for me as a 19-year-old, fresh from a little town in Illinois, right there in New York City, taking a ship out all over the world, watching this incredible feat of engineering and architecture being built. All that innocence, died in me, when I turned the corner two weeks ago and I watched it fall down on TV. And for one moment, I aged. There was closure, and there was sadness. And not to sound self-centered or self-involved, the sadness also was because I have worked many years at Columbia College. I get on a train every morning. I plan my day—my train ride is an hour and 15 minutes—I hit my office at 8:15 in the morning. I drink coffee, I smoke cigarettes, I don’t eat and I work, work, work. And all of these nameless people, not to diminish their lives in the least bit, who got up in a different time zone that morning to accomplish the same thing, the wealth of pain—it’s beyond my scope. It remains beyond my scope. So a personal part of me that left New York to come back to a little town, Batavia, where I grew up in, and then start commuting to Chicago to go to Columbia College, that closed, you know.

My mom came from a war-torn country. As a child, I was blessed and yet frustrated because I grew up in a multi-cultural family. And me and Lou used to talk about this many years ago. My mom watched her country, which was Austria, which was a beautiful country, literally obliterated by World War II. She saw the man she was married to that she had to have a forced divorce because he was Jewish. She had a small daughter. She had a star sewn on her. She went to concentration camps. Her brother was in a concentration camp. And all the stories she told me as a child growing up with the warning and hope and aspiration “May you never experience this.”

And then my father was south side Chicago, he was a world history teacher. So my benefit as a child growing up was, I got both sides of the story. My confusion as an American kid growing up was, my father worked two jobs, so I was basically shaped by my mother. And my mother was European, she was not American. And it took me a long time to culturally align myself. And yet, all those stories she told me came back to me. Because one of the things that she always told my father, and she tried to get the idea across—I’m not trying to be anti-American here—but “Your nation of people act a different way. They have never known defeat, they have never had this on their soils.” And may I be alive if and when it happens, because there’s a part of me, since it’s been beaten into me, when my mother came over after World War II and she landed at Ellis Island, she was not embraced, she was not told, “Welcome to America.” She had some dour-looking woman with a clipboard saying, “Oh, great, another Nazi.” And the fragility of what my mother was, which are her own issues, she always held onto that, because she had an accent, and nobody understood her. That was always—we make selections in our life of what we wish to keep and carry and which creates our own baggage. Now, looking back, I understand that my mom selected certain baggages and placed more significance to it.

But those stories and that sense of “It’s never happened here, and what will happen to this country when it does?” all of that came back to me in the last two weeks. So it’s the personal part of my life that has changed because I was there. All of my upbringing, stories that as you grow older and your life responsibility changes, your mind is like a rolodex. It doesn’t forget, it just simply prioritizes and your filing drawer gets a lot deeper and this stuff gets pushed way back. It has been interesting for me, just as one person reacting, having all these stories come through.

Incredible.
Yes.

And from different times of your life.
And the one salient point, not because it was my mother, I could always detach from my mother—she was a wise and courageous woman, very forward-thinking—that one statement, “What will happen when it happens here?” That has stayed with me, generally has stayed with me, because I’m watching. I have some very close friends, and we’ve started to talk about this, and they ask me—and I appreciate the fact that they value my opinion—what are my deeper thoughts about this? And honestly, I look at them and I go, “I will not share these with you. I have earnest beliefs of what I’m seeing happening, and for want of not being controversial, I don’t want to talk about it.” A lot of that goes back to what I grew up listening to.
And I want to ask you one more question and we'll go back to your story, but I'm curious, and all the thoughts that are going through your mind—the personal ones and the ones that you do choose to share—does it make a difference as well with possibly what this country is on the edge of, if it is, working at a college with this kind of America, the future leaders, or the people that might be drawn into this directly? Conceptually, it could. What occurs is, I think we are so removed in our function as an office, we are bill collectors; hence, for young adults first experiencing college, by myth, we're people you don't want to be around. We equate inadvertent negativity. We're there to hassle you, which is not true.

The Bursar Office has five Columbia College graduates in it, representing different decades, different generations. The reality of that is we have sat on both sides of the desk. Our statement that we put on our home page, our web page, is that we are trying to be educators in non-classroom environment. But because we do what we do, we're handicapped by the conception. Thus, the trickle-down effect of summoning us, of perhaps acknowledging individual and collective wisdom and availing ourselves to talk, I think—and it's an assumption on my part, and if I'm inaccurate, fine—but I believe upper management, if they began to think here at Columbia “Who do we want to guide students to to discuss this incredible national tragedy?” we would never be in consideration. Pure and simple. And we don't take it as an affront, it's simply the reality, mixed with the myth of what we do.

And I offer that, because when many students finally do make their way to our office, they're stunned. Transfer students are just blown away that they're not another file, they're not another number, that they are a human being, that we will listen, not with half an ear. We don't predicate our response, we'll take—I mean, we can have the same reason 26 times as to why something didn't go the way it was supposed to go. This relates to this part of your experience at Columbia, which is bill-paying. But they're 26 individuals, not 26 continuations of the same story. What the college is attempting to do, I believe they're having a Peace Day, we—

Today, there's, I believe, a rally. There's a rally. I think what you have, you're asking for release of emotions, you're asking for realism, you're asking for an exchange of truth. And the audience you're appealing to understand, because their life experience is fragmented. And what you can only accomplish is creating a healthy listening environment, you're not going to give them answers. To talk about this means somewhere you have to start talking about Vietnam. And there are still, regrettably, cultural handi-caps in that.

Not to belabor this point, but one that my mom raised me on is that we never see ourselves as other people do. And in that, what we have created as an image as a nation, what we're not told by mass media as to what our government does and what the CIA does, what we validate as truth versus perspectives in mass media, the young adults who are here today at Columbia College may never know.

The film of Kennedy's assassination that I grew up with, is not the same that a 21-year-old young adult who will come and sit in my office would have watched. That is in my lifetime.

So the young adult here at Columbia or at any other college is an amalgamation of image—image consciousness, selfless society—a work in progress. A variance of many cultures that, from the late '50s through the '60s, through the '70s, through the '80s, to now, have reinvented, redefined themselves countless times over. Has done it at times so quickly, you never let sediment settle. And, thus, what is your core?

I think you have young adults who are proud to be American, who because of this incredible tragedy that's been invoked, but do they understand? Has their life taken them in a journey and a place where that has become a genuine reality, not an affectation? And what I see and what I'm concerned about is the realism of this experience is beyond the scope of a 70-year-old with many years of experience, as well as a 7-year-old. Perhaps the 7-year-old, because of the innocence and vitality can clearly speak of this. People our age, above and beyond, parallel—not necessarily. I mean, you have—you're trying to categorize by diction and organizing and motions, reality, fears, the psychology of why we act the way we do. Are you upper-class or lower-class? Does it really involve you?

One of the things that we learned in Vietnam, is that technology redefines tragedy. You could sit at home every night, have your meat-loaf at 5:30 and get your body count. But because it wasn't some-
body that lived on your block, much less related to your family, the immense tragedy of a loss of life was desensitized, we didn’t take it personally. So that was going on in the ‘60s, and it has continued. How can we address that faction in trying to encourage the young adults here at Columbia today to speak truthfully? And we’re going to simply go back to, what, redneck mentality, drop a bomb? What’s that going to accomplish. Evil begets evil. Violence begets violence.

I think a lot of people here at Columbia are struggling—teachers, you know, faculty and their students—are struggling with a lot of the issues of how, you know, to ask questions and not have answers.

If you have someone in your class that has grown up on the south side of Chicago, somebody whose whole life has been the father gone, this boyfriend and that boyfriend is now in a gang and so forth and so on, somebody whose life, even before it’s been informative, has been stained by gang-related violence, that’s the person you would talk to. That is the person you ask, “Can we share with you through this class because you know what it’s like?” Because the qualifier of what wishes to be accomplished at this academia here is how many of us have experienced that type of personal violence. And you ask them for privacy, confidence to be invaded. Surely there are men and women, possibly at Columbia exposed to domestic abuse, grew up in abusive families. That is where you’re going to go in an association to try to even start collecting your emotions to address this issue.

I mean, it’s always self in society what we know one way of being. You make the choice, “What am I willing to share to my class today?”

One of the points you’re making is at the core of this, regardless of the circumstances, it really has to be faced in the issue of violence?

We have been a violent race from, what, the first grade being squished? Can’t you tell I’m a product of Columbia? I love it, I love it.

Respectfully, you know, what will lead to this larger topic, but I certainly think that it’s absolutely relevant and important and touches on a lot of the issues?

It’s timeless.

Right. So let’s go back to when you came to Columbia and you were registering, but I want you to speak to, you know, what did you—how did you find out about Columbia, what drew you to Columbia? You know, did you have some preconceptions, and then, what did you find here?

Well, Columbia was my second choice. My first choice was George Williams College, because I loved playing soccer. And if you grow up in a split-culture family, you play soccer this day and baseball that day. Well, George Williams was—between ’72 and ’76—going through problems, I guess, because they eventually went belly-up. At the same time, I had sent an inquiry to Columbia because they taught poetry. They didn’t push it aside as, you know, page 32—you had to really look for it—and they promoted it, the writing and teaching of poetry. I started writing poetry when I was 12 years old.

And all the time, I was in the Coast Guard, after a certain point of time, I was always on Columbia’s mailing list. So when my ship would come back from three months of being tossed around the North Atlantic, certain things—we were talking about timeless things, you know—everybody, it’s just like the movies, you know, you can’t wait to get back in port to get your mail. And, you know, I didn’t always get a lot, but I would get stuff from Columbia.

Do you know why?

Because I was on their mailing list.

How did you get on their mailing list?

Because I mailed an inquiry in, because I was interested in coming here to pursue—

Oh, okay. So this was while you were in the military, I’m sorry.

Yeah. Columbia was my second choice. George Williams was my first, but then that didn’t work out. And they would send me catalogs of courses. And I was raised in a family where you read all the time. So I became very acclimated to Columbia, excited about descriptions of classes being taught. I liked their non-conformity. As a young man coming out of the military, my whole life has always been one of politely and quietly pushing envelopes. I was raised with “Why do you act that way? Let’s get to the heart of the matter. What’s the bottom line? What motivates your behavior.” And that’s all-embracing, and that is your entire life—never answer that question. You’re always learning.
So I liked the free flow of Columbia’s curriculum. I liked the fact that I wouldn’t have to invest one whole year of my life taking boring core classes just to decide on what my major was. I liked the fact that I could dabble, because I knew I wanted to go to college, which was the bigger decision, but I had no idea what the hell I wanted to do with me. Columbia allowed me to start honing that. And so, when I came back in September of ’76, I moved back into my folks’ house out in Batavia, I made up my mind that I was going to go to Columbia College.

I’m making a note to come back to that. Why don’t we talk a bit about the teachers that you remember here and the students, and maybe touch on at least those three ones that you said earlier on the tape, that you mentioned in your valedictorian address.

Well, I’ll get to those, because there were other teachers. There was a lady in Liberal Education that taught a generally riveting class called “The Psychology of Dreams.” Her name was Jean Hubbard. I can’t even get the correct adverbs and adjectives. That was a blast.

Dreams are very important. This was a serious hands-on, 15-week course. Her approach was to combine Freudian interpretation with Jungian interpretation, with Alport, with Erickson, with Fran. And she was an old-fashioned teacher, so as I would free-float and fire off ten-page terms papers and theses presentations, she’d correct all my grammar. So I got education within education. She was tough, she was stern, but always accessible.

Robert Edmonds, I never had as an instructor. I got to know Robert Edmonds when I worked in the Veteran’s Benefits’ Office, and we were tucked way up on the 11th floor back at 600 South, and he had his office up there. If you’re familiar with the “Serenity Prayer,” there is the wisdom to know the difference. Robert Edmonds was the wisdom to know the difference. Robert Edmonds was Professor Kingsfield in the flesh. Stern, taciturn, a wealth of knowledge, just a fascinating and engaging man to sit and speak with eyeball-to-eyeball. Non-judgmental, unselfish, purist in his knowledge. He was a delight to be around.

There was a man named Ty Henning, who taught a course briefly at Columbia College called “Perspectives in Mass Media.” He introduced me to a whole new way of thinking. Marshall McCluhan, he introduced me to the notions that started filling the gaps, because again, with what I grew up with, there was always—not necessarily a suspicion in government—but a belief system proffered from a very early age on that subject. “Be an observer first, because things are not always what they appear to be.”

Ty’s class took that to the next level of electronic art, of electronic media, of news, of what is and isn’t. He opened this whole door of thinking for me so that when my issues that shaped me and bothered me as a kid and as a teenager and then a young adult—the Gulf of Tonkin incident, John F. Kennedy’s assassination. I shook John F. Kennedy’s hand as a little kid. He came through our town on his campaign, and I shook his hand. This man has been in my dreams as I’ve gone from being a teenager to a man, now close to 50.

Somewhere—and I know the reality of John Kennedy—there was a virtue, there was a princeliness to that man, not Machiavellian-oriented. There was a human element you don’t see today. And I suppose as a little kid—I pushed my way up to the curb to shake his hand, and it was the hand that had the cigar in it. That’s the great thing about children; they’re such a sponge for emotional clarity, just such a sponge. But Henning’s class made me look at things differently, validate it, certain thought processes that I always kept to myself.

Al Parker. Al Parker was a bastion of decency. Al Parker never lost sight of talent. Al Parker was not about Al Parker. Al Parker, over the years after I graduated, always was a good friend.

Paul Hoover. Paul Hoover took me—raw, idealistic, romantic-minded, always rhyming in my verse—cut me down, brought me back up, and taught me free verse and taught me the freedom, showed a whole new narrative style, encouraged me.

I remember the faces of my instructors, but I must tell you—and this it the bridge between Peter that was the student, the Peter that worked here part-time, and Peter that works here today—consistent with my whole experience at Columbia College. Now, I came from the military. I came from an inclusive world. It did not ask you to be creative, it did not ask you your opinion, it did not ask you to think, it simply told you, “You do this. This button starts it, this button’s a warning, that button turns it off.” I played war games for five weeks each year down in
Guantanamo Bay going, “What the hmm am I doing here? This is not why I joined the Coast Guard. I joined the Coast Guard because it’s a peacetime organization, so why is it I have a rocket launcher in front of me right now?” But that’s another time and place in my life.

What Columbia did, then and today, it took somebody with raw talent, it took somebody and encouraged them with healthy criticism. Our culture sometimes is so black and white with all the dysfunction in the family falling apart by generation and generation, one look, you know, somebody will be in therapy for 15 years.

But the sentiment, passion, the mentoring and the guiding in my individual experience through all the classes I took, was always positive. It was “This is really a good idea, but if you word it this way, if you cut this out, if you learn to just get to the point, and these are the ways that we can suggest and recommend,” it was always, to me, harmonious. And regardless if I took Liberal Ed, Fiction Writing, Radio Broadcasting, Economics, Science, there was this pervasive community attitude. It took a little guy who wasn’t sure if he was really ready to go to college, and encouraged him realistically, progressively, sensibly.

Could you expand just a bit on that term “community attitude?”
How would you further define that the student felt like that they were not the other or the outside, that they were part of a larger community?
Many of my classrooms were structured—there was equity. Yes, I’m the teacher, but guess what? I’m going to learn from you. Not, “I am the teacher.” And that was back in the ‘70s and ‘80s and, I mean, I’m vastly removed from the classroom environment today.

But the students who come, who sit and talk with me about many things and then their bill, that essence is still there. I mean, is that mission? Perhaps we could just, you know, put all our eggs in one basket—I’m not sure. But the humanism, the unselfishness, the pervasive “I’m here to help you,” it was very open-minded, it was very challenging. It suggested to you, “Anne, I know you want to be a photographer, and we’re going to do everything we can for you to aspire and actualize your goal, you know, because you have such a passion for capturing the moment. Maybe you should also look at marketing, advertising, because the thinking involved in understanding, the stratus of emotions and the single moment you want to capture as a photographer, that’s a creative process. And until you go to a class that is going to make you think about the creative process, you’re not going to understand your work empowered.”

The Columbia I went to was initially known as a broadcasting college, TV college. But wherever I went, it was more like, “We want to give you life education. We don’t want to just be a cookie-cutter, make you the next Howard Stern,” or, at that time, Larry Lujack. “We don’t want to make you the next hotshot TV producer. We want to make you holistic.” And for me, ‘cause that was my bent and my slant coming out of the military ’cause that’s what I grew up with, I leaped at it. Not initially, unh-unh, but as the years went by.

One of the ironies, too, for me, is I opted to have personal freedom, so after the military was just forced to go to college. I never got my hair cut the entire time I was at Columbia College. And what was so interesting about cultures within cultures and why we think the way we do, by the time I was a junior, I mean, I looked like the ZZ Top guy. I mean, I had a beard down to here, I had hair down to here. I graduated with full, like., va-voom. I have my pictures.

I’m struck by, you know, probably just the image of what you might look like in your uniform in the military, coming to registration in your suit, and then graduation.
Yeah. And it never failed, after—I noticed it started slowly in my sophomore year, and then it was in my junior year, and I was like, “okay.” But always that first week of new classes—there was this guy, flannel shirt and blue jeans, he looks like a biker—“I’m not going to sit next to this guy, okay? He just was too scary for me. I mean, all he needs is a little cross in his head, he looks just like Charles Manson, oh, boy.”

About the fifth week, they began to realize, “My God, this guy’s a serious student who’s taking notes all the time. He’s asking the questions that I’ve been struggling to ask for three weeks. I’m going to sit next to him.” And I was just like, “I wasn’t good enough for you week one, so why do you want to sit next to me now?” you know. And Louis was the—

Silverstein?
Louis Silverstein—that was—I can’t find the correct word necessarily. He was like the divining rod. That really surfaced in his classes. I
took three classes with Lou, he introduced many friends to his “Tallulah” prints. And now, when people matter to me in my personal life, I want to give them a special gift, I give them “Tallulah” prints.

So here’s a stranger whose life was shaped by many events, comes to Columbia, leaves that indelible impression that I, as a stranger in exchange, go out of my personal life and pass on a wealth of experience that he, in doing his duties as a spirited, compassionate teacher, at a institution, which happens to be Columbia College in part, you know, the wealth of experience is what you carry on.

In that sense, Louis Silverstein, Paul Hoover, Ty Henning, who did not teach here for a long time, Yuri Rasovsky, who was deeply involved with Chicago radio problems, tough as tacks instructor, we didn’t get along, he kept calling me John. So I got fed up with that, so I started calling him Larry, and he got offended. At that point, I was accumulating a little ego because I was a straight “A” student. He was the first to start to give me a “B.” And I was like, “whoa”—humility is a wonderful gift. Invariably, you see it in your rearview mirror after you’ve driven through it, you know.

I remember Steven Russell Thomas when he taught. Louis brought him for one of his classes and I thought, “Who is this strange looking man,” which, of course, shows my age. But what a wealth of knowledge this man had.

There was a woman, I remember her first name, and unclear on the last name. It was Dorothy was her first name, and the last name will come back to me. She taught a class in my latter years, “The Psychology of Religion,” which for me, as somebody who grew up around Roman Catholics, who walked away from it all, was just a joy because it gave you, in laymen’s term, a full review of all the world religions. It proffered to gather—and this hooks back to one of my thoughts as a kid growing up because my father had this argument for years with his family—what’s the difference between a Lutheran God and a Baptist God and a Catholic God and a Protestant God? I mean, what’s the difference here?

And my father had his own issues with religion as a child growing up on the south side of Chicago, and those got planted into me more than I think my sister. Then when I took this class at Columbia, it was like, “whoa,” you know. And then that led me to read a lot of Native American literature, their whole sense of time, their whole sense of God, their whole sense of oneness with the universe.

I know Dorothy was her first name, she taught in Liberal Arts.

There was a woman that worked in Admissions named Mary Kay Lombardi. Long blond hair, she was a deejay for an underground radio station in Oak Park in the ‘60s and ‘70s. She married a rock musician. She was just a blast to be around. I mean, she was kind of like—my mom used to use this word—kind of like that free-floating, hippie-type of person. Columbia had a lot of that vicarious spirit back then. It was very relaxed in the sense of corporate structure. What was it there, upper management occurred? It occurred in and of itself by its own virtues and of its own accords, and how it worked its way around you, if it did or didn’t.

(inaudible) Agretti, I will always remember, not only because I became a predecessor, but because she was the first person I met, staff-wise at Columbia, that smiled and said “hello” and was kind and decent.

There are many people I remember that have since passed on—Hermann Conaway, Hubert Davis, Bert Gall’s brother was here for many years, Jerry, and then he left and went out to New York.

If I can, I want to bring us up to the project, or more current because of time constraints. You’ve touched on this a bit in talking of the role of the Bursar’s Office. But do you see it having a role in the part of the educational mission of the college, and if so, maybe address that? And also, if you could touch on the issue of retention and the financial difficulties that some students face and, you know, them leaving or retaining them and how you work through that.

Well, to answer your first question, and regrettably, the answer still is “no.” It’s no because the packaging and saleable idea to Columbia College does not include cost, it does not include cost management. Countless times—I’m starting my 19th year in the Bursar’s Office—I have sat down, have a young adult in front of me about to sign his or her registration contract, and it’s the first time that cost becomes a reality. And the fear you see in that face.

We have tried over the last five to seven years to make ourselves more visible as a function—not as an office, not as a collective personality—and move ourselves further up
the food chain so that in the orientation, we are there. We never used to be invited to orientation. We make ourselves a part of orientation. In fragmented ways, the Freshman Center—I’m sorry, Freshman Seminar—has us for a whole week. We come down, we talk.

But overall, cost effectiveness, fiscal management, is not, perhaps, an attractive thing in marketing an institution, and I can understand that. We’ve gone from “Come on down,” which we were like in the ’60s and ’70s, to being gregarious and selective. We’re changing our concept, our image, our face, our product. We’re more sensitive. And we hardly have alumni awareness presence. And that’s not a slam, it’s simply where we were then.

Retention is a double-edged sword. I don’t mean to be like a functional person and always bring everything back to what is my reality, my slice of pie, which is fiscal management and accounts receivable. If, in the screening process, when you bring a young adult here, and he or she is prepared, he or she has what they need on file completed and ready to go, you can gauge the preparedness and your retention and your success ratio. If, in the spirit of Columbia, which is still commendable, you don’t, but you feel—I mean, I go back to when I came here. I was hesitant, but I wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt. I wasn’t sure if this was for me, but it worked for me. So if it works for me, it can work for countless other people. That’s a journey that repeats itself, regardless of world events and who is the president now. That is a mechanism built within the community of Columbia College. We give you that alternative education possibility.

There are those who, by quantitative data, were shown that retention works. The art instructor, do you see the matriculation? Do you see your Robert, who was in your class his freshman year coming back in his junior year taking a different, more advanced class that you teach? Yes and no.

The sadness in my line of work is I regretfully, by default, take a young adult who invests 15 weeks of his or her life, doesn’t do what they’re supposed to do because the emotion of fear and “I don’t want to act stupid and look stupid and ask stupid questions,” they end up having a sizable bill which will not allow them to re-register. And then within “X” amount of months, by business being business, they’re outsourced to a collection agency. So then in the failing, it’s a failing of higher education less than a failing of Columbia College. They have such a bitter associative taste in their life about the college because of this experience, which in time becomes a blameless experience, but the larger effect in this is they want nothing to do with higher education.

I used to struggle with guilt, because by virtue, wondering if one’s job contributes to this. I became concerned about if I’m doing my job effectively, am I cutting into retention? Because I’m not allowing a freshman, who owes us $6,000, who’s gone 15 weeks and hasn’t responded to his or her bill, hasn’t responded to his or her letters from the Financial Aid Office, that you need to do this and that to get your file completed, to get your awards posted to your account, has for any number of reasons not followed through, and thus the consequence. And that’s the larger life education. Where do you draw the line of sparing somebody the consequences of life education? I mean, looking back to what we started talking about, it’s next to impossible really.

So I know—I could tell one story of a woman that I knew for eight years—I will not give her name, it’s not fair—this was a woman who was extremely difficult. She would get thrown out of classes. She would come to my office, because what happened in the culture within the culture, I guess, it was generally understood, “You’re a pretty calm and patient person really. You don’t fly off.” I think as the years went by in the Bursar’s Office, I would always keep the student (inaudible) nobody wants. And it didn’t bother me, because that’s a challenge. “You’re a human, I’m a human. If there are problems, let’s humanly look at them.” Where did I learn that? I learned that in the classroom. I learned that from a Louis Silverstein. I learned that from a Ty Henning. I learned that from talking to Robert Edmonds, because it’s people.

And she would come in, she had an Indian style, rocked back and forth, yell and scream, cry, throw things around. She would disappear, then she’d come back. She’d get outsourced to collections and then come back. This was a woman that it took her eight years to graduate from Columbia College. But in all of these changes, I saw in this woman—she would always come in and basically hustle, “I need my refund. I need this, I need that.”
There was something underneath it. You learn insight by how? By exchanging.

And as the years went by, trust was built up by service and also by sitting down and being just and fair. And saying, you know, “I can’t keep doing this just because you can’t manage your life.” As the years went by, she would talk to me about her drinking problem. She would talk to me about being homeless. She would talk to me about her abusive family environment. She would talk to me about how all the Christian values she was raised with fell apart in her life. And she would cry. And she would vent all her anger, which had nothing to do with Peter, had nothing to do with Columbia College, was everywhere. And underneath all of that was the decency, the desire, the tenacity, the esteem to believe without BS’ing herself that she could accomplish. She graduated last Spring, she lives in Arizona. I wrote her a letter of reference recently ‘cause I’ve known her for many years. She sent me an internet Blue Mountain card. Columbia made a difference in her life. In my line of work, I can make a difference, and that’s it.

Regardless of—I mean, I’m talking, what, almost a quarter of a century now I’ve been at Columbia in one capacity or another. It made a difference for me, as well, individually in how it taught, what it taught, the spirit. And I have been allowed—and as we grow older and we prioritize what our values and our ideals are—I have friends that say, “You know, for all that you go through at Columbia, all the crap that you go through”—which is true. I mean, I have parents that I’ve never met who yell at me all day. I choose that, I’m not going to excuse that. It comes with the territory of what I do.

I have friends who say, “You know, you could be making a hell of a lot more money somewhere else. Why do you choose to stay around?” Because all the money in the world doesn’t amount to much of anything, but if you can make a difference, you see it, it’s earnest, it’s sincere, it’s insightful, and it’s timeless. And I made a difference for this one person, and somebody (inaudible) a difference for me by saying, “Peter, let me talk to you,” you know, “I like how your mind works, I like how your perspective is, I like how you’re viewing. You ask interesting questions. Can I suggest this and this? What you think is ‘A,’ maybe move it down to ‘C.’ And what you think is ‘C,’ move it up to ‘A.’” Expand your thinking.

Writing, I had great experiences in the writing department here. Okay. “You’re here, take one step back. How does the room look now? Take two steps back. Go out in the hall, describe the room.” That whole creative thinking. You know, because we teach at Columbia, that doesn’t mean life isn’t creative. That’s right. And because I’m a bill collector, doesn’t mean that I cannot.

But do you worry, from what you’ve said, you were treated as an individual? And the anecdote that you told about the woman coming to your office eight years, you honestly treated her as, you know, an individual human being worthy of your time. And that was your experience with many people at Columbia. And so now, you in turn are doing it. Do you worry if the college gets larger, because so many college students at other institutions, their experience is being a number? They’re desensitized.

Right. Will Columbia be able to maintain that humanness, that making students feel like they matter as, you know, as a person, as an individual? Can we keep that feeling going? Is that at risk, do you think? There’s something the human in me wonders about, that the qualifying it, I am so removed today here from the classroom experience. I’m so removed from the student, the intellectual experience at Columbia, I have become a product of my environment, which is much more administrative oriented. It’s a different playing field, it has different boundaries. So I have a mixture of thoughts and emotions in addressing that.

My belief is regardless of whomever, you have too much sensible wisdom in the rank and file at Columbia College, that benefit from what Mr. Alexandroff wanted to create, that have never lost his latitude, his humility, a compassion. And teaching’s teaching, administration is administration—a world of difference. What I still see here at Columbia is the want to go above just teaching. It’s more fragmented only in how I received it, because my position at this institution is different. I’m not on the enrollment management side. My viewpoint is selective, but it’s not one that I just drive by and, okay, “These are the parameters in how I do my job.”
To answer your question, I think there was a concern "X" amount of years ago that Columbia would become a dinosaur, and that was just judging marketplaces. You had so many people being so specialized, cookie-cutter Keller MBAs, but then what the workforce and the world was saying, “You know, I love your specialized knowledge, but I’m sorry, your human skills suck.” And that’s the truth. And what Columbia does is meld the two, that has not stopped. Will it continue? That is the guidance, the wisdom, the insight and leadership of Dr. Carter, a Paul Chiravalle, a Michael DeSalle, a Bert Gall. That’s not deferring and saying all the rest of those individuals, they have the tact and the understanding to go back to people that have been here and say, “You think this is a good idea?” That’s what I like. With this whole reorganization going on, they still come back and go, “What do you think?”

**So you get a real sense that there is a respect for the history, the tradition for Columbia, even with new blood coming in?**

When they’re exposed to it, they’re stung by it—okay—as a lesser emotion. I mean, when we first started talking today, you’re investing time in an oral history project. You have more exposure, for instance, than I do. I’m just one person you’re talking to today. I’m sure you have a lot of connectivity going through countless people that you’ve already spoken to. There’s a wealth here that will always stay here. Torches do get passed on. I mean, I’m looking at being here very soon almost 20 years, I’m going to be 50 years old. Your life changes. And what I mean by that is, I started having to think about retirement when I don’t want to think about retirement. I’ve watched all the men in my family work many, many years at the same job, that loyalty to Yasir. I can’t ignore that.

I’ve spoken many times with students who come back the same day. Now, I’m just a steward, but I’m not the only person at Columbia College that is committed. I renew it every day, I do the best that I can because that’s what it’s all about.

The great thing about Columbia, I think, and I believe what I’m hearing through upper management today, changes will be made to our structure, is they understand our uniqueness. Our uniqueness is built with what Mr. Alexandroff started, what Dr. Duff took in different directions, and where Dr. Carter wishes to go. The core, the honor of that experience is this is what has always been at Columbia. We’re not staid, roped, (inaudible), Ivy League. We’re not—you know, “You’re a peon, don’t talk to me. Don’t you know who I am?” It’s not that, it never has been. And I don’t think the leadership at many different levels at Columbia would ever encourage that. That’s the slap in the face. And I don’t really feel that’s ever going to happen around here, I really don’t

**Let’s address this restructuring and what your new position is going to be and your take on that, positive or negative, you know, where do you see the college going?**

Well, initially when Dr. Carter came, one of his viewpoints was that we have many great things here, but we need to tweak the

Infrastructure, as many colleges are (inaudible). Then you have your ivory towers, (inaudible), administration, staff or academia. (Inaudible). We’ve been very proactive in this growing organization. We’ve kicked the can of one-stop shopping for years. We want to empower the student. You’re a mature adult, (inaudible), and we don’t think like that, but we’re going to empower you with making decisions through technology, through service, through competency, through good turnaround time to more and more involve yourself with your college experience at Columbia. We want to make your experience from, (inaudible) as good as your academic and intellectual experience.