

## Jeff Schiff

*Okay, it is April 19th, 2001; this is an interview with Jeff Schiff, Faculty Member, the English Department here at Columbia College, Chicago.*

**And we'll just start, if you could tell us when you came to Columbia and what the circumstances were—**  
Sure.

**—at that time.**

I came in late summer of 1987, and I was hired by the composition program. This was, I believe a couple of years after the breakup of the English, slash Writing, or Writing slash Fiction Department, into the English Department and the Fiction Writing Department. And I came here to really work at getting a state of the art composition program.

**Who hired you?**

Phil Klukoff, he's been the Chair of the English Department and Lya Rosenblum who was Dean of the College and the Vice President without portfolio.

**And who did they find you, how, you know how did you find out about Columbia?**

They did a national search.

**Were you here in Chicago?**

No, I was actually at Northern Arizona University at Flagstaff Arizona, where I directed the writing center and I had been there for three years and the tenure winds there were not blowing in my favor—at least I felt that. I wasn't really happy with anything but the physical beauty of the place. And so I thought that coupled with the

fact that my wife who also has a Ph.D. in English needing a full-time job, those two things together seemed to point to a job search. So I did a job search and this came up, it was interesting. It was really interesting because they were looking for someone who had a background in the arts and at the same time had a background in rhetoric. And so I fit the bill, because I had both. So we came up here. My son was a year old. My wife, the next year got a job at Loyola in the English Department and I've been here ever since, this is my 14th year.

**Can you describe more of your arts background?**

Sure, all my degrees are in the writing of poetry. I actually got a mentor when I was an undergraduate and, in the world of poetry and his name is Tony Cutcheling. It was in Rockport, New York and the State University College of Rockport and I spent my time there at his feet basically, not literally of course figuratively. Getting in touch with his tutelage with the muses and then actually went to study with this teacher at the University of Texas in El Paso. And then I went out on to at Binghamton to get my doctorate (inaudible) and so I had that as a background in, in the job market. Then was similar to now, you know many applications nine (inaudible) to get a job that was good, tenure track jobs. So I actually did a post doc tour for a year at Purdue University and rhetoric in business writing. And then the world was much more open for me in the workforce.

**Can you describe some of your first impressions of Columbia when you came here or when you were interviewing and how it was different or something—**  
Sure.

**—something surprised you.**

Well, you have to understand that although it's not the hinterland or the hinterlands of Flagstaff it's certainly way out there, I'm a Jewish boy from New York City, so it's a little strange being there although I did go to school out west. It was very much culturally the west. People stayed to themselves. People had that kind of individuality, the pioneer spirit in a sense.

And when I came here, I got off the plane, I believe I flew into Midway. And Phil Klukoff, who is also a Jewish boy from Queens, we grew up not far from one another, actually was there to meet me, which would've been unheard of in Flagstaff there in Northern



Arizona. And I remember driving up Lake Shore Drive from the south passing what's now the museum campus area. And even though I'm from New York, I haven't spent that much time—I hadn't had the time, spent that much time in the city or spent that much time in the city life. Of course, Phoenix is not much of a city.

And so I remember then driving up Balboa, with the Hilton Towers in front of me and, and the large hotels and so forth and being struck by the fact that I had not prepared myself for this urban presence, you know. And so that's the most striking thing. And then when I got here, I realized this place was—this college was unlike any other, for the good and for the bad. So it's quite an adjustment. But the city itself, it didn't take me long to get used to that again.

**And maybe you can talk about—we'll come back to 'for the bad' but what—**  
Oh.

**—for the good, when you say Columbia was not like any other place?**  
Well, it was not like any other place, in that you could get things done without having to go through 7,000 channels. There were actually decision-making people at that time. One person was Bert Gall and my Chair who actually could listen to whatever it is you had to say and get things done. We didn't have faculty governance, in the same way that we do now. We certainly didn't have layers—bureaucratic layers in the way—well, we don't really now, but we will probably shortly. And things didn't have to

fester in committee and things didn't have to get tossed around all the time and that's, you know for the good and for the bad. And so I was unaccustomed to that plus I was at state universities and colleges beforehand and this was a private thing, for totally different, because you don't have the same powers to answer to.

So there was a kind of freewheeling spirit to the place, still at that point overall. As I understand it was actually tightening up a bit by then. It was still pretty freewheeling. My colleagues were very real people. I had been dealing with a bunch of really uptight people who would stand around in the mail-room and snipe at people, read their memos and laugh out loud and just really nasty atmosphere.

Where I was for instance, people hadn't gotten raises for about five years, not one penny, and so as you can imagine people were pretty pissed and, and people would take it out on each other. And it was such a small pot and such small stakes, people showed their worse selves. And they considered themselves typically more valuable than they were. They, they were, many of them frustrated, but they ended up in third rate university and they aspired to all sorts of things. And when I came here that was not the case. People were committed to the teaching, whether they were good at it or bad at it—that's besides the point. They were just committed to it. Many of them were homegrown, which was good and terrible, at the same time. But anyway it was a, a good atmosphere, it was collegial, it was friendly, it was—we're all in this together, we're in the same thing together, let's try to figure out what's, what, what best to do.

**Can you describe the program that you, you were brought here to design it—**  
Yeah, I—

**—yes or no—**  
Well—

**—or were you given?**  
I was given carte blanche basically.

**You were? Okay—**  
Yeah.

**—could you then talk about what you brought to the program, the goals you had and what you wanted to implement?**

It's, it's been a long time now, I haven't done it for a long time, it's about 10 years. What I had in mind basically was student-centered education. I had in mind the fact that students were going to be writing not about literature, which had been traditionally what comp students were writing about. But rather—

(PAUSE)

Anyway, it was a student-centered program that was based on trying to teach students the skills that they might use outside of college. It was a program that was very much rooted in conferences with students, with drafting, with understanding the aims instead of the modes of discourse, so that it was a very purposeful approach. It was also very much in contradiction to what had preceded it, which was a very doctrinaire approach through the Fiction Writing Program, which was so prescriptive or as prescriptive—so prescriptive that it actually had students sitting in a particular configuration, with their chairs touching one another and

went through in a very systematic way and a very prescribed way. And mine really relied on the students as the generators of the discourse and the students as the generators of almost the protocol or, or the system used in class. That's probably about all I can remember at this point.

**Well, and are these things that, that seems very much reflective or complimentary to what—you know Columbia's mission and purpose that, not necessarily utilitarian but you said it's very purposeful. They weren't writing about literature which some of them may never use again. Is that something that, that you were developing before you came here and were frustrated with in previous teaching experience or did you?**

Well, it—

**After hearing about Columbia was it something that developed and you were able to, to put in place once you got here?**

Well, I, I quite frankly did not do research into Columbia, when I applied for the job. I was willing to take whatever interviews that I could—that were offered me and I don't think you learn much about reading, because often it's propaganda. Excuse me, I was always interested in a case-based education, which is very practical. It puts real world stuff in front of students and asks them to react to it. That's just my sense of things so yes, I practice it elsewhere and no, I did not get any negative feedback elsewhere, just was that it was understood elsewhere that this—what, whatever program you were in by virtue of your credentials and having been hired and academic freedom, that you were going to

work within an acceptable bandwidth. So it really wasn't an issue elsewhere. And here it seemed to fit well.

The other thing is that one of the greatest challenges of the job was, at that time, I could expect to have 50 or 60 part time faculty members working for me. And what I was able to do in the best of days, or best of years, was, I was able to get us heading in a similar direction, not an exact direction but in a similar direction. And I think one of my skills is my ability to actually hang with people and listen to them and, and sort of show them that perhaps what, whatever it is they were doing anyway would fit nicely in our "package" and that they might exploit some of their own natural talents in, in its favor.

**Can you speak more to that on the challenge of working with, you know so many part-time faculty? It, it sounds like you've been able to work with it.**

Well, I lasted in the job just shy of four years because I was troubled by that. I was troubled by, you know actually as, as I recall I was not so much troubled by the fact that, that I had part-time employees working for me, so many of them and the change was constant. I was troubled by the fact, that after a while I realized that I couldn't do the things—I couldn't ask them to do the things that we all thought were necessary, full or part-time faculty, because the administration at the time was dead set against what they considered to be gateway consciousness, what they considered to be anti-theoretical—to the open admissions policies of the college.

I was very much in favor of developmental—offering a full range of options for students. Of diagnosing students upon the entry, which seemed natural to me and, and certainly necessary. Then deciding where they should go because we had the expertise and directing them. In fact making it a requirement that they take courses in a certain sequence and that was very much antithetical to the, the culture and the politics at the time. And I had trouble advancing that and so my faculty members, particularly my part-time faculty members, who were generally in graduate school at the time and getting this in theory in their classes at UFC or, or UIC or Northwestern, could not believe that we couldn't find out before a class began where a student stood and how best to deal with them by virtue of placements, etceteras, etceteras. So that's the kind of thing that ended up being problematic. Not that they were here and gone and didn't have an investment but rather that they had this investment but an, investment that was coupled with a very current knowledge of the field and their frustrations that came from that, when they encountered this. When they encountered the fact that they were in a culture that seemed to promote a kind of student in the driver's—driver's seat. You know damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead when it, it was totally against it ran counter to their theoretical and their—yeah, their theoretical underpay. So that was the problem with the part-timers, not what you would expect to be.

**Uh-huh, uh-huh, and Columbia has—that has changed or has come a long way in?**

Yes.

**—to an assessment, could you maybe in your opinion tell us where we're at today? Is Columbia doing a good job, have—what do they have to do more on assessing students or finding out where they're at and, and guideline them?**

Well, interestingly or ironically or perhaps because fate blows the way it does I, maybe four years, five years after that became the college's first Assessment Coordinator.

**Okay.**

And I actually was able to put in place or to facilitate; I wouldn't say put in place but facilitate that change of culture that we're talking about.

**That was for the college?**

Yes.

**So you did English?**

Yes.

**You, you left the comp program?**

I, I took what I termed a, an administrative furlough.

**Okay.**

I was asked by the then Provost, and to assume the role of the assessment. People called me the "assessment czar" and I called myself the "assessment jester." And—

**And that was the first time there had been an assessment coordinator?**

Yes. What had happened was the winds of change in the academic world, you know blew towards mandatory assessment and this would be learning outcomes assessment. And the college submitted an assessment plan that was required by our agencies, the North Central Accreditation

Agency and, and what happened was our first submission failed. That was rejected. And so the college was, you know, in, in a funk about that and, and troubled by it and I—the provost asked me if I would serve as co-chair first as a committee and it turned out that my co-chair wasn't particularly interested in it.

And at that time I was burning out on being in the classroom and, and so I thought it would be a good challenge. It was also something that I had been prepared for at Purdue, when I was studying rhetoric and the systems interests. I had systems interests and structural interests and so I took that over and for the first, while I helped all the departments graduate and undergraduate create acceptable plans. Which I knit together and actually turned into the plan that was accepted ultimately by the, by North Central.

**Was that—and you became that like '92 if I'm—'91, '92?**

No, I actually think that I became that in '96, or 7.

**Oh, okay.**

It was '96, I believe.

**Okay.**

And I stayed in that role for two years.

**Okay.**

A year after we were approved, our plan was approved and, and went through a full cycle and then I thought that I had done whatever it is that I wanted to do. And I tried to come to terms, actually with the administration about a different purview and a different kind of contract and we couldn't come to terms on that. So I decided that I would be better off in the English Department.

And I had never really left the English Department. I kept going to—coming to work and keeping my office and I had always been the Coordinator of Technology in the English Department and I didn't want to let that go, thinking that I might return and that I wouldn't want to give that up. Plus we didn't really have the personnel to take it over. So I kept it and then I returned, and so I returned to the classroom to get my degrees in technology.

**Okay, so then after you left as assessment coordinator, you went back, you continued as coordinator for technology in the department and then what, what were you teaching then? What did you decide or agree to teach?**

I, I typically teach—

**—when you came back?**

I, I used to advertise my classes as being offered by Dr. Intro because I, I had always been interested in teaching introductory classes, for both altruistic and selfish reasons. The altruism is that I thought that full-time faculty who had a lot of experience who are termed perhaps here and elsewhere as master teachers should really be in the front lines so that they could welcome our students. They could also give them the best possible face, show them the best possible face in college. And encourage them, as I was encouraged as a student to explore their talents in a certain way.

And so I thought I had that kind of rapport with students and, and so I, I would take those classes, a steady diet of those classes. And I also took it for selfish reasons, because in years past I've had classes that don't make and I don't find out

until in, in the years past it was like a day before the semester began. And then I would have to take on a class that I hadn't prepared for or wasn't interested in teaching. It was offered at the wrong time for my schedule, etceteras, etceteras.

So those two things, together, gave me a firm sense that I would take introductory classes. And so I taught Intro to Poetry, and Intro to Literature, and Intro to Drama and, I continued to teach Intro to Poetry, which is my favorite class. And, and I teach now Basic Public Speaking, which I haven't taught for years—but for the same reason which allows me now to get back to some of my roots in rhetoric.

So, I, I basically teach intro classes. I have in the past taught Contemporary American Poetry class. And I, I've taught actually now I didn't realize that was some—I held some other position but we'll get to that. I, I also taught the workshops of poetry but decided that I was not interested in and nor temperamentally suited to teaching workshops in poetry (*inaudible*). And so I, I, I've decided and I, I, I feel good about it right now to teach these introductory classes. The only real issue is that I typically never see a student after that—

**After—**

—first class. Although some students repeat it, even though it's a lateral move.

**Yeah, take all the introductory classes—**

Right.

**—that you teach.**

Right, so.

**You mentioned other positions that you just talked—**

Yeah, I was actually, because of my background in rhetoric, I was also asked to design a masters of arts in teaching for the educational studies program. And the way I was asked interestingly was off the cuff for, by Phil Klukoff, the then chair and I actually created a—he asked me to create an Edenic Program, and of course I took it just that way.

**What's Edenic?**

Of Eden.

**Oh.**

Right, so if you were—

**Edenic.**

If you were in Eden, what would a program at the master's level, in the teaching of writing look like.

**Oh, really.**

Yeah, and so I created that without any sense that the college was actually going to adopt it for real, for a program that was happening at the time. And so I didn't—I actually served as the liaison, the graduate liaison from the English Department and ran our part of the Master's of Arts Teaching of Writing and got very frustrated after a year's time, because our students were really not suited to the program that I put together because I didn't put it together for our students. I put it together for Adam and his descendents. And so I bowed out of that after a while but I, I did teach graduate classes in Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing, for a while.

**I want to back up just a moment because—**

Well, you're not allowed to.

**When you talked about your future at Flagstaff that you were concerned, it didn't seem like tenure was, was coming your way—**

Right.

**—did it trouble you that at that time Columbia didn't have tenure, which now they have in place, was that an issue or?**

No, actually this was the last stop for me. I was totally disenchanted with the goings on, the political goings on at NAU and I thought, you know, I'll give academia one more shot since I had invested so much in it. And I thought of no other avenues all those years. I thought that was it, I was going to be a college prof, it seemed to be culturally suitable, it seemed to be the right mindset, sensibility, etceteras.

So I really didn't think too much about that. I thought that I would either want to be at a place and be able to match or meet the requirements or not. The, the requirements at NAU were easy enough to meet. They were, I had a feeling they were going to be interpreted in such a way, that they were going to deny me tenure. And they had a tenure quota and by virtue of percentages alone, they could've denied me tenure. So, and I was not interested in being with those people and have—living with them as my colleagues. And so—

**For the rest—**

For the rest of my academic career and that's the way I was looking at things, setting down, getting into it, into a groove. And so when I came here, I didn't really know too much about it. I knew they had this funky probationary, non-probationary system, which everyone explained to me as defective tenure

anyway once you got over the hump. And when I came it was only a three year period and then shortly after my arrival it became a five year wait period to become non-probationary. So, I pretty much got it quickly so that I wasn't worried about it much at all.

**From what you've said between you—where you were born and raised and your education and your job—**

Right.

**—you've been all over the country.**

Yeah.

**And this is the longest place you've been at.**

Well, yeah—

**Profession—or since you started your ed—higher education?**

Yeah, I actually spent one semester teaching at McNee St. University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, which was more cultural shock than Flagstaff, because it was the Deep South—what remains to be the south. A place I not so affectionately refer to as, Lake Chuck. And I was working on my doctorate. I had been working hard on doing research on Sherwood Anderson, the American short story and writer and novelist.

I had actually been writing on a, on a poet's view of his autobiographies because he wrote many autobiographies and I had chosen three of them and I was interested in his particular sense of his own history. He was a revisionist historian in that, he kept on changing the stories about his life over and over—from incarnation to incarnation or from volume to volume. So I was interested in him and, and I got a professor who was willing to take it as an artist's view, of an

artist changing their view of the world and themselves.

Well, I was offered a job—I, I was making 4,500—4,200 dollars a year at the time as a TA. And I, I was offered this job in Lake Charles, Louisiana for 15,000 dollars and it was a last minute thing. Literally last minute, because at that economy people had shifted for private schools to this public school. And I got a call in July and, and a friend of mine was down there and offered me this full-time job and I thought it would be easier, I foolishly thought it would be easier to get another full time job having had one already, you know with some experiences.

And so I went down there, and boy that was culture shock. Oh, an incredible sort and magnitude and so I actually left there and I left there after a single semester. I applied to post doc programs after I was there for about six weeks. It was 110 degree heat and 200 percent humidity and, and I actually got this thing at Purdue, so I went up there. So, I've been, yeah, I've been around. And I've been here the longest. And of course that's the effect of getting older and having a family and not being able to go out there. And I, I keep looking in my pockets but all my wild oats are gone, so I don't have that need to sow them.

**Okay, well let's move on to looking at the, the college as a whole and, and your perspective of it.**

**How would you describe the mission of the college? And has it changes since you first came, do you think?**

Well, there's a mission statement, but the way I understand the

mission and the way I understood it then, was that the college tries to extend to anyone who's interested as much opportunity to explore at the college level all the things that we have to offer that perhaps they may not have had formal introduction to, or not have the ability to engage in. And I think for the most part that remains true. The real issue is in the interpretation of that.

I have lived in a camped environment, since I got here. It's not a nasty camped environment, the way I'd experienced elsewhere but it is a camped environment. It is—the camp's split basically along these two lines. They both understand that to be true, that mission to be true and one believes that letting them in and, and, you know giving them some, excuse me, small scaffolding is enough and then to mix metaphors, allowing them to sink or swim. A very Darwinian Spencarian approach to the, the world.

The other camp, which I'm in, has been you know give us your oppressed, give us your downtrodden, give us your hungry, give us anyone who's screwed up in the past, give us anyone who's excelled but has been weird. Let anyone come in, but let us recognize that we are the educational experts here. And we can best diagnose, we can best understand, we can best facilitate, we can best direct those students who come here. Yes, you may think you have an aptitude for X, but guess what my experience really suggests you had an, you have an aptitude for Y coupled with B, which you can't get anywhere else. Let's work that. Let's show you how to work that. Let's give you the best chance of succeeding, even though it might

rub you raw that you have to take certain classes in a certain order. Even though perhaps, you are by nature not the kind of person who respects authority. Even though you want to wear six berets and pierce every body, body part and organ you have, listen to us because we were hired, because we have the right sensibility, because we have your best interest in heart, at heart. And because we know best, not everyone and every occasion, on every occasion but we, for the most part, know best. And we will get you to where you want to go.

We'll make your exploration brutal, not frustrating and so that has been the schism or the divide. Obviously not as polarized as that in every terms, in every term and, and not as polarized with every person. But that is you know the most rudimentary and basic engross sense of what I've seen, is the divide between the two camps. And I was interested in promoting the latter and I have spent my time vociferously promoting the latter.

**Has the—was the balance one way or another, was it, what even has the balance shifted?**

I think that when I arrived, we had a silent majority in favor of my sensibility but that the, the political power, the political movement, the political whatever you want to call it, was clearly standing in favor of the former. And so while most people I talk to were very troubled by the things that were then status quo they didn't have the power. There was not a governing structure that allowed them to exercise any power, or have any power and therefore there's a lot of bitterness, a lot of frustration and it's taken a long time for that to change.

And during those days there was a, an interesting parallel division or perhaps a division that came with this sensibility regarding open admissions and that was there was a, an us and them mentality with the majors and the general education department. And so I was in a quote service unquote department and the bucks and the hours and the favors, etceteras, etceteras, seemed to flow to the major departments who were servicing in a much sexier, jazzier way are clientele. And the people in Gen. Ed. did not, weren't seen or weren't regarded in the same way they are now. Nor were students expected always to compliment in a purposeful, pattern, systematic way their study in a major with studies in general education.

So, sure there were some requirements, I don't remember exactly what they were, they were minimal compared to what they are now but the emphasis was clearly, predominantly, overwhelmingly major, instant, emerging, get what, get what kind of contacts you're going to get. Get into your field as quickly as possible, etceteras, etceteras. And we saw many, many seniors and juniors in freshman level classes as a result. Who waited until the very end, who weren't sure they were here to go to school for four years anyway, wanting just to be graduating, just wanting some contacts in their industries, etceteras, etceteras.

So, now we're seeing that we are often the first or second choice of students. Often students are coming here, more students seem to be coming here with degrees in mind. And so all of these things seem to go hand in hand. There seems to be a shift away from the clientele that we had back then. Or

maybe we are shifting in reaction to the fact that we're getting a lot, a lot more non-urban, nontraditional Columbia, traditional Columbia students. We're getting more traditional students. Students who might go to Northeastern, or might go to UIC, or Loyola, or DePaul or, or Chicago State, are coming here as a first choice seeing our academic strengths. Not only our strengths in the professions but our academic strengths as they now bridge both of those sides, if you will.

**Did you run into and I've heard this before, of the message being given to students to get their Gen. Ed. elsewhere? And has that changed?**

I would say that many students understood themselves that there was a price differential. That it would be much less expensive to go to the College of DuPage, or to go to Harper College and take their Gen. Eds. there and instead of faculty in the majors, in the discipline saying, you know what we offer a unique brand of this that dovetails with what we offer in the majors. Instead of doing that there was a tacit kind of agreement, if you will, that sure, take it wherever. It doesn't really matter, because we're here to teach you this, we're here to teach you photography. We're here to teach you how to make a film,. We're here to teach you to act, and so on and so forth.

Now certain departments were more sympathetic to our "cause", than others. And so you wouldn't get as much of that in those departments. Now at the same time, I must admit that we weren't necessarily offering those kinds of Gen. Ed. classes that were going to

specifically cater to these students. And many of us were pushing for those. Make this taste like nothing else, make this something that students want to take here, make this something that the majors will want to endorse.

Now there was a fight among ourselves about that, because many people who came here—when, when I first got here it was not uncommon for people to have bachelor's degrees, teaching with bachelor's degrees and master's degree was totally acceptable. My department was full of people who got their master's degree. Some of whom got their master's degrees here in fact. Some of who got them in our department, in fact and those people were not necessarily going to have the same attitude as the people who then came in with more traditional academic degrees. And, and often times people with this traditional academic degrees were saying wait a minute, one of our duties is to actually create a student pool here who will go onto graduate school. And therefore they need things that graduate schools would look at as base classes, the basic stuff.

Well, I never looked at it that way. I, I always thought, if you want to make your way to graduate school and you come to Columbia College, you're not going to a traditional graduate program. We don't have an English major. We've never had an English major and so I certainly wasn't interested in creating English major-type students. I was interested in creating those creative types who could then go on and say I'm going to get an MFA in poetry or fiction or, or I'm going to go

into the study that, that happens to be cultural studies or happen to, happens yoke together in an inter, interdisciplinary fashion, a lot of different things.

But there was definitely a problem with people wanting to be traditional and I think that problem exists today. That many of the faculty members and I guess this is a backlash, in reaction to the fact that they were not able to put in place the most common sense things, as far as placement or as far as class requirements or class numbering systems, etceteras, unable to do—that now feel like they really have to crunch the students. They have to offer them a very traditional approach or, or for us anyway a very traditional approach to things.

It's almost that, certain people see this as a way to impose a law and order consciousness. And, and I'm sorry that has happened because there's a way for us to exercise all of these options in a very Columbia way, a way that's suited to us. It's not as if you're looking out there at the wider world of the academy and seeing that everyone's having success but us. Quite the contrary, people are actually moving towards the flexibility that we originally had at the college. My version of the flex—my sense of that original flexibility was that it took too many chances and it actually put students at peril or the students who were at peril at risk were, you know just fodder.

I think there's a middle for us and I hope that we get there. And I fear that we are not necessarily going to get there because now that we have tenure and now that we are getting a lot of those students from the college communities and elsewhere,

we are attracting a kind of faculty member who has those traditional trappings. You know who has those publications, who have those interests that you might construe as somewhat traditional. And I think with that comes perhaps a law and order mentality. And so I'm troubled by that. I don't want to flop by any means all the way over to that side. We should not be a mini-Depaul or mini-Loyola.

Loyola's about to go under, as far as I can tell and Depaul's having their own troubles with these particular issues. I think what we need to do, is we really need to do what originally we stated or what I interpreted. Back to what I said before, how I interpreted our mission statement was let everyone in with the implicit expectation that we're going to graduate everybody or as many as we possibly can, with our brand and it's really a brand name issue. I would love to see the day where our students were required to take, for instance all of them, every last one, a cultural studies minor. So that every one of our students have that kind of background that extended to the left and to the right and up the, the center and then include—everyone was touched by art, in a way that isn't necessarily true because we're an arts and communications college. So I want all the artists touched by communication and I want all of the communications people touched by arts and I think that's what really would make a strong to the future, stronger than we are going to be I feel.

**I, I, I want to go back to, to, to something that you said earlier and I keep—**

I keep telling you, you're not allowed to go back.

**—just to, to—that the attitude or philosophy of exposing a student to higher education is enough or is better than not?**

Yes, yes.

**—and, and your, your problems with that attitude, did that ever turn into an ethical debate? I mean was, was it—**

Sure.

**—at its essence an ethical issue?**

Yes.

**Did you—I mean did you see it that way?**

Well, I argued against letting them in and letting them sink or swim because of, of my ethical concerns. I also argued, practically because it's bad business. There's inc—a student who is not prepared for these classes gets terribly frustrated and sees the door revolving and is just as likely to walk out as to come back. And so I argued on both behalves. It's unconscionable to take who we viewed as our traditional student, first generation of college.

So they'd have no background, they'd have no sense, urban coming from a defunct public school system so we couldn't bank on them getting it in high school or being properly advised, coming in here and spending money. Sure it's not expensive by some measures but it's pretty expensive to a lot of our students. Coming in here and just taking a class and typically at any level they wanted because we didn't have a real numbering system and then feeling totally frustrated and leaving us and having a terrible enough experience to drop out of education completely.

So yes, that was unethical and I saw it as un-, unethical. But I also saw it as a way to actually—my version of it as a way to get them to stay here, which is certainly something I want because this place pays me and I hope will have enough money in its coffers to pay me until I die, you know in retirement monies. So I saw it, you know, on both levels, both professionally viable, and personally necessary.

**And your—setting aside Loyola's current problem—**

Yeah.

**—would you—does your wife currently teach at Loyola?**

Yes.

**In the past, you know, 10 years or so how long you've both have been teaching (*inaudible*), what—**

About 10 years.

**—how are your students or the things that you talk about are things that you confront in the classroom possibly different using Loyola as an example of a more mainstream—**

Right.

**—or tradition university or college?**

Well, I think that there was an achievement in aptitude gap that has narrowed completely or, or narrowed to where it almost doesn't exist at all is what I meant to say. There has been very little change in the behavioral differences between the students. My wife on a day, on a typical day will get 95% attendance. On a typical day, because I spend a lot of time in other people's classes and just walking the halls, I would say that we could expect between 60 and 70. It depends on the class, percent attendance at the introductory level.

Students here are of course working themselves to death often. They are trying to juggle a lot more, than students in place like Loyola, and as a result their studies suffer. Their aptitude, their interest, their abilities, their creativity certainly are parallel, are similar. There's a parody there or a close to parody these days. My best students are by all accounts, much better than the best students there. My worst students here are much, much, much, much worse there—at, at there.

And so that's what I'm still confronting with the classroom, this incredible dynamic range. Which makes it very frustrating for my better students. And very troubling for my at risk and challenged students. I do not have the ability to deal with both of them. Now we have support services that are in some regards unparalleled. We have an incredibly large writing center, we have a reading program, we have an ESL program, we have all this stuff that I was fighting for all these years.

We actually have diagnostic assessment now. We don't have necessarily mandatory placement but it's defacto mandatory placement. At the same time, you have students who are still showing up in the wrong places at the wrong time in their academic careers, in the wrong time in their personal careers and they are having trouble. My students and this is an epidemic in this country, are having an incredible time managing basic written communication. They cannot write sentences as a rule. They cannot fashion paragraphs. Couple that with the

analytical activities that are required of them, they get very, very, very frustrated. And as a result of that, they are also less likely to stick around.

And I don't think that's Columbia's problem alone, I know it's not. So when you're in a classroom, when you have those students on end, on both ends of the spectrum you cannot give either one all that you would hope to give them. And I think that problem is more acute here than in a lot of places. I don't know if I answered your question.

**No, that—you did. Have your vision or philosophy of education changed at all in your tenure here?**

Yeah, you know when you get out of graduate school you tend to expect every student, you get to be a mini-graduate student. You expect them to have the interest and the abilities that you're accustomed to in graduate school. Now, I had been three years at NAU and then a year at Purdue and half a year at McNee, so I was somewhat divorced from that or separated from that, but I still have that mentality. I still got very personally upset when my students didn't achieve. And now I've gotten to the place for, mostly for sanity sake I've gotten a place where I realize that I have to put in my best effort, I have to make myself accessible to students. But beyond that I cannot get to as many as I had hoped to get, to when I was a very naïve graduate student coming through the ranks.

So that has changed. The—I've become practical in that regard. I've also allowed myself to laugh a lot more in the classroom, as a

result of student's inabilities or failures or troubles and I would just, you know take it very hard. It would be. Sometimes it would be difficult dragging myself into school, because I would look at these students and I would say, "you know I've changed this class six different ways to accommodate all these people and it's just impossible to accommodate them, what's wrong with them?" Well, what's wrong with them is really what was wrong with me.

And so as a result of that I, I've changed. I see students, as, as a rule, outside of class. I don't insist on using the class time in the way that I used to. I try to make sure they do some of the reading they don't necessarily do all of the reading and you know I issue a lot of medio—what I consider mediocre grades. They don't seem to bother them that much. You know that, that kind of investment in, in traditional academic excellence. I have to revolt, so I taught myself to actually take what I considered to be a personality full of good humor and compassion and just put it right out there and, and teach as myself as opposed to. I, I don't wear any masks anymore in the classroom.

My students, many of them know me as Dr. Pretzel. I buy pretzels, I don't know it's a weird thing my, my, my son who went to, who was in high school now, when he'd come home and tell me that he got food from his teachers. I'd say, "food it's bribes, man that's terrible, that's ridiculous," but I, I use it as a way to comfortable with my students quickly. My students often come in they, they're harried, they didn't have time to eat, they're not focused, they don't know what to

expect. They know they haven't necessarily done all the work that really—and, and still in all I have three hours with them and I want to make the best of those three hours. So I want to make them as comfortable as possible and that's what I do, so I end up going across the street and buying these bulk pretzels. And I always have them and students in the middle of the class now feel free to walk up and grab some pretzels off the desk and go back and sit down. And that stupidly, you know I go to all—I went and got a Ph.D., I got a post doc and all of these things. That's almost as effective as anything else. You know of course this is going to appear and I'm going to remember saying what a—

**Would, would you encourage or discourage your son to come here?**

You know I've been thinking of that as of late because he shares—

**He's in high school?**

Yeah, and he also shares the sensibilities that my wife and I share, which are, you know, have contempt for authority, which is a, a good ticket for this place. Understand that busy work, unless it's in support of the things you really care about, is just that a waste of time. He's also interested in photography, he's interested in art and all of those things and I think to myself, would he be a right fit for this place? And I've always maintained that this place is really great or very purposeful. Very directed students who had checkered pasts. Who are atypical, who are nontraditional, who have said, you know I've worked for four years dishing donuts or dishing coffee. I know what I'm about now and I'm

after it, and I didn't want any bullshit and I'm going to cut to the chase and I'm going to go right for it.

And those—my concerns, my area happen to be within our domain—of Columbia's domain. This is a superb place for that because you can really meet some excellent people, excellent teachers and really break out of the box or live outside of the box with a good support system. My son, right now, doesn't evidence the kind of behavioral stick-to-itiveness, the discipline necessary to succeed. And I'm still troubled by the other end of the spectrum, which is this place, if you're not that purposeful would not encourage you to wallow but you could wallow.

And so right now, given who he is today, I'd say "no, I wouldn't want him here." But if he gets his act together then I would say, yeah he could get a lot from this place.

**Okay, good I think that's the perfect, we're just about to run out and that's a perfect point to stop.**

