

INTERVIEWER: This is the MIT-150 Oral History project interview with Isaac Colbert.

COLBERT: I'll respond to either one, but Colbert is what I grew up with.

INTERVIEWER: June 18, 2007. Interview starts at 9:00 a.m. So maybe we could just start with your background, where you grew up, what your family was like.

COLBERT: I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. I was born at the end of World War II. I'm one of the baby boomers in that wave that began after the soldiers began to trickle back home, or flood back home from the theaters of war. My father had actually done two stints in the Army. He was very patriotic, but he was injured in a jeep accident in Belgium after the hostilities had ceased. From everything that my folks told me, his jeep ran over a landmine, an unexploded landmine, and he was the only survivor. He and three of his best friends were in that jeep. He survived after a fashion, but he spent most of the rest of his life in hospitals.

We used to visit him every week. Some of my earliest memories are of mom taking my brother -- there's just two of us, my older brother and me -- packing us up and taking us first to Walter Reed for awhile, and then the Army moved him to Perryville in northern Maryland. We used to go up there quite regularly to visit Dad, and sometimes he'd know us, sometimes he wouldn't when he could come down. Most of the time I was too young to go into the ward, so I had to sit there while everybody else went upstairs to visit dad. So it was a really curious weekly event for many, many years. Then my father passed away in 1959.

So essentially, I was brought up by my mom, her sisters who lived near by, and the kind of close-knit community that formed the kind of village that is hard to find anymore in urban communities. But there were elderly people around and professionals and working class people, et cetera, in the neighborhood in northwest Baltimore. Everyone took care of everyone else, really. I remember many, many times when I was doing something or my brother and I were doing things we weren't supposed to do, some neighbor would say, "Aren't you Rosalee's boy? You wait until she comes home." I knew what that meant. It was an interesting neighborhood.

My parents actually really grew up in Baltimore. My mother was born there. Her family of five girls had moved up from Pensacola, Florida in the 1920s. They don't talk about it very much, they never talked about it very much -- clearly it was painful. I pieced together over the years that Klan activity had something to do with the decision to move north. They settled in Baltimore. My father's family was already there. My father and mother met in high school, and the rest is history and I'm a part of it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any memory of any major events growing up?

COLBERT: Oh, lots of major events. I certainly remember the first TV, which was a console model TV. We were maybe the second family on the block to get a TV. My mother and sisters put together so that we could have one -- it was a little black and white picture. There wasn't an awful lot on, but I remember a show called *Western Trails*. It was a whole lot of westerns with Gene Autry and Pat Buttram and that whole group. Then at some point there were a couple of comedy shows, Milton Berle to keep everybody laughing. I do remember that.

But the first serious thing I remember was watching some of the McCarthy hearings on TV. I remember seeing this relentless, rather humorless guy on TV pressing people about communism -- do you know or have you ever known anybody who was a communist? It was just pretty upsetting. I remember my folks were really upset with him about that. They thought this was just terribly un-American and that he was persecuting people and he was. I just happened to have been watching at the time when Edward R. Murrow -- used to watch Edward R. Murrow show quite regularly -- at the time when he really called Senator McCarthy to task. I clearly, clearly remember that. Even then I knew this was something important. This was something really important. So I remember that.

I remember Sputnik very well. I thought it was both cool and scary that the Russians had actually put a satellite up in space and it was beeping above our heads. But there was certainly a kind of call to intellectual and scientific arms that went out. I benefitted from that in being in a city that was still around that time intensely segregated. Most people don't understand how segregated the city of Baltimore was. I clearly remember separate drinking fountains. I clearly remember the back of the bus. I clearly remember not being able to go into -- well, it really was an awful little place called the White Coffee Pot -- on the way to school on a cold day because blacks couldn't go in there for many years.

It wasn't until at least the late '50s, early '60s or so before the Civil Rights Movement brought an end to all of that, and it kind of crumbled pretty quickly. Once I did get into a White Coffee Pot and tasted that awful sludge that they called coffee. It was one of those be careful what you wish for kinds of things, but the point wasn't how good the coffee was. The point was that everybody had an opportunity and a right to go to any of the businesses that were there to serve the public.

So I remember that, and in fact, had my own little role in the Civil Rights Movement in Baltimore, too. I found out very quickly that despite all the training, et cetera, I was not exactly non-violent. When somebody came at me, I went back at them. Good old urban survival came to the fore. After that I supported the movement from behind the scenes and out on the front line, so it was really interesting.

INTERVIEWER: What was your high school like?

COLBERT: I should say first that the elementary and junior high schools I went to were neighborhood schools, and therefore, they were all black schools. The education and preparation I got there was absolutely superb. One of the by-products of the kind of segregation that we had was that a lot of teachers, superbly trained teachers, could only teach in their communities. So there were lots of teachers in junior high school, for example, who had Master's degrees and doctorates.

In fact, my homeroom teacher, Mr. Moore, who was a big influence on me, spoke many languages -- he spoke French, German, Spanish, Latin fluently and Greek fluently. He taught all those languages. I just thought he was an amazing human being. He always wanted to be a college professor, but he just couldn't get the jobs. But he always pushed us to excel academically, to push ourselves as far as possible. We did benefit from the national mania, really is what happened after Sputnik went up, to develop kids with interest in science and engineering and math.

So, the class that I was in, which was a pretty sharp group of 28 boys and girls, we were privy to a very special educational curriculum. I don't remember an awful lot about it except that we were always "accelerated." We were tested every year. Somehow or the other we knew we were getting something that others weren't getting, so we had much advanced material. I realized later on that by the sixth grade or so, we were being taught trigonometry, but it wasn't called that. I didn't realize what this was until I really got to high school. I've seen all this before, I know how to do this stuff. So it was a superb preparation.

INTERVIEWER: So, this accelerated program with Dr. Moore, so multi-lingual, they were products of--.

COLBERT: Oh, they were products of a public education system that largely doesn't exist in this country anymore, dedicated teachers, lifelong teachers in classrooms that were full of stable individuals from stable families who wanted an education. There really wasn't -- and maybe I'm being rosy in my recollection -- but there weren't drugs in the schools, there wasn't a need to deal with mental health issues, broken families, communities in distress. There wasn't a need for the teachers to deal with this whole complex of social and psychological issues that are in the schools now. They really are a product of a tremendous amount of social change and breakdown of traditional communities.

No, the teachers could focus on education. They didn't have a whole lot of trouble keeping us in order either, because we were sent there to learn, and parents made sure we were there to learn. There was this contract between, both spoken and unspoken, between parents and teachers that if there was some trouble, the teachers would get in touch with the parents or the parents would get in touch with teachers and that kid would be straightened out.

Today everything is different, and largely because they have guns. They have guns, they have drugs, they have bad images surrounding them. There are more distractions than there were in my day. So the teachers taught, and the students tried to learn. I found that my preparation was second to none. In Baltimore, there are two of the oldest public high schools in the country; Baltimore Polytechnic Institute and Baltimore City College. Poly had the reputation of producing the engineers, City had the reputation of producing doctors. Both were exam schools. I took the exams, I was interested in City College, it's called Baltimore City College. I was among those who were admitted to the 10th grade class. Found out there was a ninth grade class, but the black kids didn't hear about that. It's okay.

This was the special college preparatory curriculum, and the kids in these three classes, these three homerooms or maybe four, were on our way to college, to good colleges. So we were the intellectual, the lead of the school. In my homeroom class there were six or seven black students. Most of the students in that school were Jewish, in those curriculums were Jewish. A lot of good friends are made out of those kids, a couple of them I still am in touch with.

I found high school to be one of the first of two wonderful arenas. I was sort of in my element. I was well-prepared, so I knew I could keep up, hold my own with any of the other well-prepared students there. I was in everything. I found that I really enjoyed student government, I really enjoyed drama, because I had been involved outside in stage productions, et cetera, so I loved being on stage. I was in every kind of club and extra curricular activity you can name, and most of them I ended up being president of, so it was really quite something.

My only challenge in high school was my homeroom teacher who I had a running battle with the entire time. He kind of saw me as smug and out of my place, and I saw him as a jerk. We just had a running battle all the time. I had a sharp tongue back then and wasn't afraid to use it, and he didn't quite know how to deal with that. He wasn't quite used to having certainly a black kid talk back to him and tell him that you're not being fair and I'm not taking it. We had a shaky peace. We were at a shaky peace. When I graduated at the end, I remember him telling me he was trying to be hard on me because I had to be prepared for a hard world.

INTERVIEWER: What year did you graduate in?

COLBERT: 1964, class of '64. I remember telling him that clearly I can make my way in the world and I didn't need him to make it more difficult for me, but thank you for what you tried to do and goodbye.

Then I went onto Johns Hopkins to undergraduate school, which was four years of boot camp.

INTERVIEWER: The reason why you chose Johns Hopkins was the--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

COLBERT: Yeah, it was the best place around. My vision didn't extend much beyond Baltimore and Maryland. I was not a world traveler. The family couldn't afford to travel much, and most everybody I knew was in Baltimore. The best place to go was Johns Hopkins. So I wasn't interested in Morgan, I wasn't interested in the University of Maryland, I wasn't interested in any of those other things. I said I'm going to go to Johns Hopkins or I'll go into the Army. I've never forgotten my interview with the director of admissions who looked at my -- I had a little CV at the time that I put together with all these things I'd done, and great grade point averages and all that kind of stuff.

He looked at it and complimented me on how well I'd done in high school, in a tough high school. But said, I'm not certain that Johns Hopkins is prepared to accommodate Negro students. Why did he have to tell me that? I said to him you don't accommodate one or we're going to be in court. Then he looked down at my papers again and discovered that we have the same birth date, December 7. We got to talking about Pearl Harbor and Pearl Harbor Day and all of that. The long and short of it is that I got admitted to Hopkins with a full ride. Sometimes, sometimes it's the accidents of fate that get you where you need to be.

So I matriculated at Hopkins in the class of '68, and thus began a couple of years of hell. I thought I was going to major in chemistry. It didn't take me very long in my freshman chemistry course to realize that they didn't like me and I didn't like them. The faculty member who was in charge, and I remember his name to this day but I will not state it. On the first day in class just sort of came over to me and said, young man, it's going to be very difficult for you to make a good grade in my class and I knew exactly what he meant.

I stuck that class out. I ended up making a C -- that was the first C I'd ever made. I was not happy. I decided that I was not going to stay in a department that didn't want me. So I can switch to biology very quickly where I was doing fine. So trudging along with the rest of the students in a time when everything was so intensely pre-med with all of the cut-throat competition that that entailed.

INTERVIEWER: Pre-med?

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COLBERT:

Oh, it's much better now. It's so much better now. It was amazing to me how unscrupulous some of my fellow students were. They would razor their articles out of the journals and go to the library and just tear or razor their articles out so the other students couldn't get them. These were days when the faculty would publicly post the exam grades on the door and everybody was crowding around to see the exam grades. There was always somebody looking to see who made a bad grade and would yell out the name -- oh, Feldman, you made a D. You idiot, Feldman. Colbert, how did you make a B? Those kinds of things. It was just abysmal, it was abysmal.

But that was life then and I slugged my way through Johns Hopkins like the rest of them. My freshman class had only four black students in it. Three of us were from City College, and one was a young man from Grambling, Louisiana, who lived in the dorms. He didn't survive. He didn't survive his first year, he left after that. The rest of us had the benefit of going home to receptive and supportive communities. I think it is that -- on the positive side, living at home made Hopkins bearable for me. So I'd commute in every day. On the negative side, living at home meant I was still with mama with all that that entailed in my life. But I got through Hopkins.

INTERVIEWER: Was that their first class of black students that were admitted?

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COLBERT:

Oh no, there had been a few black students here and there over the decades, actually. But we had probably more in our class, in the class of '68 than ever before, and we proceeded, of course, to agitate for change. It wasn't just the few black students who were there. The times wherein Civil Rights was in the air, Vietnam was heating up, people were looking down and saying this could get to be a mess. Even in '64 as we were sending advisors over to Vietnam, and it got to be really nasty by the time we graduated. I'll get to that in a minute. And by '66 it was really heating up quite a lot. My goodness, I remember President Johnson helicoptering in from Washington on several occasions to give major policy addresses at Hopkins. He really liked Hopkins because Milton Eisenhower was president then and they were apparently on very good terms.

So the air of change was in society. Civil Rights was prominent. There were many voices saying that Hopkins needed to be more diverse. We didn't use that word back then but that's what was meant. So subsequent classes brought in more students of color. But Hopkins has never been and never become the kind of diverse institution even that MIT is right now. It was kind of grim in that regard, so I could go back to my community and see people of color, see affirming, hear affirming messages, et cetera. It really wasn't until the end of my sophomore year, beginning of my junior year that things really turned around. Quite by an accident, because of an accident.

In that time, the government made available to college students summer employment opportunities. You had to take the civil service exam, and for those who did well there were employment opportunities, summer employment opportunities, at up to the level of GS-4 in a GS system, government HR system, and GS-4 was something like \$4,000. \$4,000 a summer and back then that was, my gosh, a fortune. So of course I took the civil service exam, did extraordinarily well -- I actually thought it was a pretty silly exam. So, I did extraordinarily well.

I found that I was offered and then kind of assigned to a job at a place called Edgewood Arsenal. It turns out they had misclassified me as a psychologist, but they offered me a job at GS-4 level, the Edgewood Arsenal up in northern Maryland. I sort of said well, why not, let's see what this is. So I went up there, it was in the experimental medicine division, the psychology branch. There I met my first real mentor, who is a close friend, his whole family is like a second family to me, even now. I was in a lab that was involved with chemical warfare, and we were testing chemical warfare agents in blind and double blind experiments on animals, ranging from rats and pigeons to monkeys and apes.

In a lab a little ways from us they were using humans, but I wanted no part of that. We had quite enough arguments about the ethics and morals of what we were doing. Bill would pick me up -- Bill Wagman was the head of that lab -- and he would pick me up from the house in the morning and we'd drive out there arguing all the way about the ethics of what were doing. It was a lot of fun.

In that lab, I got my introduction to computers and digital logic circuitry. I did my first real experiments actually on my own. I won an award for the summer research that I'd done. Got a publication out of it, which was promptly labeled top secret, so I've never been able to get it even since then. And I was invited to come back the next summer. Outside of that program they wanted to classify me as a psychologist at GS-5 and bring me back the next summer, which was wonderful. What it did with the lab wrapping itself around me that way was convince me to change my major.

So I went back to Hopkins and talked to the dean about changing my major at such a late date, which required taking a huge overload. I think the dean was more than happy to let me do that because he thought I was going to fall flat on my face. But what I did was then enter this department, the psychology department, and found a home. The faculty there -- for the first time in my experience at Hopkins the faculty was happy to see me. The faculty members were absolutely welcoming and delightful. In fact, kind of conspiratorial about my social education.

They would take me over to the Faculty Club and we'd have some real fun experiences with this black kid coming in the Faculty Club for faculty and sitting in one of the big high chairs and saying I'm with them -- instead of serving them, I'm with them. They told me a lot about the field. As I look back, I got my first real interest in organizational behavior because of them. That wasn't what I majored in, but they told me a lot about the politics and inner-workings of academia and the departments.

INTERVIEWER: Were they organizational, experimental, social--?

COLBERT: They were experimental psychologists. It was a little of everything there, but mostly experimental psychologists, social psychologists were there. I happened to walk into one of the faculty member's office. He was doing these wonderful experiments with rats and their licking behavior, and he had invented a little device called a lick-o-meter. When rats lick, their tongues are very fast and you can actually condition that. So anyway, he invented a device to measure that. It's called a lick-o-meter. It was carefully controlled with lots of electronics at the time, so I thought this is neat. I said I want to work for you, can I be in your lab, can I do something for you? He looked at me and he said come on downstairs, let's see what you can do.

We went down to the basement where a couple of his graduate students were-- had a piece of equipment, hooking up digital logic circuits in the [UNINTELLIGIBLE], and I looked at and said I know how to do that. I've been doing that for a couple of summers and pitched right in with it, pitched right in with it, and was who is this kid? Where did the kid come from? And really made a bunch of friends right away. So I became one of the darlings of the department.

Both they and Bill Wagman at Edgewood Arsenal were saying you're going to graduate school, kid you're going to graduate school. I'm sort of saying well, why? I can go to work, I need to go to work. You're going to graduate school. They decided where I was going to go and I was going to go to Brown. Since I was in experimental psychology, it was at that time the number two ranked department in the country. Experimental psychology, the number one ranked was out, some were in Boulder doing things that I was interested in, and I wasn't interested in going across the country. So they sent me to Brown. They wrote these wonderful, obviously, these wonderful recommendations, and I'd done extraordinarily well in the department, and I was admitted to Brown, Brown's graduate school.

Which started another chapter in my life, because I didn't even know where Brown was at the time. They said we're sending you to Brown, and my reaction was what is that some black college out in the middle of nowhere. I remember Jim Deese, Professor Deese sort of saying, you've never heard of the Ivy League colleges? I said yeah, Harvard and Yale and Princeton, yeah. He said well, Brown is one of the Ivy League schools. You little fool, it's up in Providence. I said where's Providence? So I went and looked up Providence and saw it was in Rhode Island, the littlest state in the union. You're sending me up there? Okay, all right.

So I actually arrived in graduate school sight unseen. I had not gone to visit before. They had sort of sent forth the word, you gotta take this kid. I arrived in Providence in the summer of 1968, and found wealth that I had never seen before. My gosh, I'd never seen so many Maseratis and Lamborghinis and Porsches, et cetera, and this is what that undergraduates had, and in a place with these big old Victorian houses of a sort that I'd never seen before. There are very few places like that in Baltimore. And the city that was different than anything I'd ever imagined before. First of all, I instantly fell in love with Victorian houses. I thought oh my gosh, these are beautiful, these are absolutely beautiful. And saw what real wealth was like with some of these students who were at Brown.

Then walked into my department -- the Walter Hunter Laboratory. Walter Hunter was one of the great psychologists and the lab was named after him. I walked into my future advisor's office, Alan Schrier, who was standing with his back to the door and he was looking out a window in his office. I kind of walked in and cleared my throat and said Dr. Schrier? He turned around and looked at me and said, may I help you, with a little suspicion in his voice. And I said you're Dr. Schrier? He looked at me and said yes, may I help you? I said I'm Isaac, I'm your new student, Issac Colbert, and his eyebrow just shot right up. His eyebrows shot right up -- I've never forgotten this moment. Then he caught himself and said, oh, I didn't know. I said you didn't know that I'm black, did you? Well, it doesn't make any difference, doesn't make difference. Just the revelation that nobody in any of my recommendations had said anything about my race, and nobody in the department knew that they just admitted a black student.

So there was all of this jiving for a week or so where the department head, everybody realizes now they've got an African American student. Oh my gosh. Department head wants to give me a personal tour of the lab, and he's walking me around introducing me to people. Then he walks me down the main staircase of the department, and it's one of these grand staircases and it goes up in two in either side. In the middle of this grand staircase on the wall ahead is this large picture of the founder of the lab, Walter Hunter.

He had his arm around my shoulder, and Jake said to me, this is Walter Hunter, the founder of the lab, and I have tell you, he was no great lover of your people and he's probably turning over in his grave right now, the fact that you're here. I'm sort of why are you telling me this? So what I thought to say at that time was, well, that's good Dr. Kling, because I'll make sure I walk by the old bastard's picture every day. It was sort of he realized he'd said something really bad to me. I said it's okay, it's all right. However, that was the only sour note in four years of joy and I just proceeded to have a wonderful time in graduate school.

Once again, there were 10 of us in my interning group. We all got along together pretty well. It was clear that I was at least as well prepared, if not better prepared, than the other students. So very quickly I established that I knew my stuff, and that calmed things down really quickly. Plus, I'm a bridge builder, so it wasn't long before I got to know every faculty member and chatted, what do you do. Found things of interest with lots of people. It wasn't long before I was pretty well-known and accepted in the department, and I had a wonderful time in grad school. It's that experience that influenced my vision for what graduate school here ought to be like, and the kinds of experiences that our graduate students ought to have.

Our faculty told us two things at the very beginning. You're not competing against one another. We brought you here with the expectation that each one of you will complete your degree. And two, we expect you to work hard, but we also expect you to have lives, and we're going to do everything we can to make sure you have a life. I thought hey, great. So interaction with faculty was very cordial.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have an idea that you weren't supposed to have a work-life balance or that graduate school meant giving up-- I mean, sacrifices?

COLBERT: From seeing people at Hopkins, yes, because they were just total workaholics, total workaholics -- they were like robots, actually. The intensity was just not to be believed, and that sort of is going to be my life, I don't know. That's why I'm not going into medicine. In fact, the psychology curriculum as an undergraduate, if you really wanted to go into psychiatry it was extremely easy. We had some wonderful people. In fact, everybody back then did a psychiatry rotation sort of, we call it rotational psychology classes. We did the anatomy and physiology classes, the cadavers, and all that that entailed, people passing out all over the place and throwing up all over the place. It was kind of fun, actually.

But I knew I didn't want to go into medicine because as I looked at the way those people looked, worked and conducted their lives, it didn't seem like what I wanted. So I went off to graduate school, and this was this is what we were told, basically, at the beginning, you're going to have lives. I thought that's the way graduate school's going to be, that's the way it should be. I had no other examples to counter that.

So we faculty come down to the room where many of the graduate students had offices, it was a big circular place called the circus. They put a table tennis setup in the middle and they'd come down and play ping-pong with us, and take us out, you know, say, what are you doing, we're going down to the bar and to have a beer. They taught us how to drink. They wanted to know what was troubling us. A couple of faculty members in particular were just very close to the grad students, and they wanted to know what our issues were. There were times when we would be invited to a faculty member's home for dinner, and one of the rules was no shop. So we worked very hard, we really pushed hard -- we had to write lots of papers, we'd give lots of presentations. It seemed like every month there was a defense of something or the other, or a presentation after which you were grilled thoroughly to see how well we knew stuff. So we were well-prepared.

INTERVIEWER: It was in spring '69, right?

COLBERT: That's right. I do remember the astronauts landing on the moon.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit about what campus was like? **COLBERT:** Yeah, that was a time of great change. When I arrived at Brown, there were seven other black graduate students in the whole university, and about 26 undergraduates, most of whom were young women up at Pembroke. This was before Brown had formally merged with Pembroke, they were talking about it. All of us embarked on recruitment. We were pretty militant at that time because that was the big Afro kind of days, lighting matches kind of days. We realized that with the war heating up -- actually, the war had really heated up by then. There was a whole draft issue that I haven't talked about.

But I did get to graduate school despite the several attempts of my draft board and local draft board to send me to Vietnam as cannon fodder. I had seven -- seven, visits to the recruitment center, seven. They were really trying hard. It was Edgewood Arsenal that really worked it for me, made sure that I didn't get drafted. They said if I had gotten drafted they would have made sure I got to Knoxville to do more chemical warfare research rather than into Vietnam. I wasn't having any of it. I wanted to go to grad school. Anyway, the long and short is I got to graduate school.

But when I got there, there were, once again, very few people of color. We all got together and we decided we needed to do the recruitment and we needed to make the administration pay attention and give us resources to do it. So there was the usual storming into the president's office, storming into the provost's office and the deans' offices, acting militant and saying this university needs to do something or we're going to do the recruiting and you're going to pay for it and blah-blah-blah. Sure, okay. So we spent lots of time.

Actually, when I look back on it, it's not clear how we ever got our work done because we were off recruiting, and to great effect. The next year those numbers tripled, and then they continued to grow. Even in the department, even the psychology department, the undergraduates and I and the other black graduate student, Juarlyn Gator, we did a march on the department to say that the department should be able to find a faculty member of color, and we helped recruit a faculty member of color. It was part-time in that department and in medical.

So we did all that and still got our stuff done. I actually, I look back very, very fondly of those years in graduate school. The campus was -- it's one of the most beautiful campuses in the country, and especially in the spring to see Brown's campus is amazing. It was a very liberal place. In fact, I can remember the undergraduate curriculum where there were no majors, taking whatever they want to take. I chalked it up to all these rich kids, Buffy and Muffy coming to campus, coming to college. There were some bright kids, but they knew that the trust funds were there, lots of them. But nonetheless, nice people.

There was a lot of turmoil around the war, opposition to the war. There were marches. There was Civil Rights marches, and the black students were demanding rights and equality and attention, et cetera, and all of that was swirling around us at the time. Social change was in the air, free love, pop, experimentation with psychoactive drugs. All that, it was being young at a time when everything was changing, and it was wonderful, it was absolutely wonderful.

I do remember an occasion in which it was very clear that two people who sort of insinuated themselves into our group had to have been federal agents. They were older than us, it was a black woman and white man and they were supposedly together. They wanted to know everybody and all kinds of stuff, and we kind of thought these two are a little funny. As we started to freeze them out, they just sort of disappeared. But we all realized in retrospect they were agents. They were seeing who was who in this group. I've never forgotten those two because they were just so much older than the rest of us, and trying to pretend to be students. Oh well, but there was a lot of suspicion in the air those days.

INTERVIEWER: Did you live with anyone at frat? Did you have a roommate?

COLBERT: Yeah. Well, the first year, in '68, Brown had just opened the new graduate center. That cohort of students was the first to live in a graduate center. It was a horrible building, a horrible building. Just the most abysmal construction. You could hear -- this was like a seven story, eight story building -- you could just hear everything going on in that building all the time. The walls were thin as crepe paper. It was just a terrible place. After that, I and a good friend, Chet Lupton, who was one of my contemporaries in the department, and Jim -- gosh, I forgot Jim's last name now. But anyway, one of the other undergraduate students decided we'd move off campus and get our own apartment.

So, we moved off campus and got a fantastic apartment nearby and roomed together for awhile. Then Jim met his girlfriend who eventually became his wife, and then they went to move off. I found this wonderful legacy apartment in one of the named houses on the hill. There was this lovely old woman who was a real character. She was in her '80s at the time. She drove a green Nash Rambler and could wheel that thing around on two wheels up and down the hill. She drove like a mad woman, never got into an accident.

She passed that apartment on to me, because it was recommended. The only thing that she required for whoever was in that apartment was that you had to once a month have tea with her and her friends. This is where it really began sort of a formal education in gracious living was having tea with this wonderful group of old women who just were the most delightful, and sometimes delightfully foul-mouthed people I'd ever -- just some of the dirtiest jokes. And these were society women, and I had a ball with them. Of course, there was no tea to be seen anywhere. It was all cocktails and sherry and stuff. I just found myself looking forward to that every month to go up and have conversation and a few drinks with this lovely bunch of old women who were just so much fun to be around. Of course, they had a young man who was giving them attention. So it was mutually beneficial.

But through them I kind of met some other people of means who would invite me to dinners, invite me to places where there were these table settings like out of a magazine. When I was a kid, if we had a fork and a knife and a jelly jar for a glass, we're doing fine. But here's a glittering table with four or five forks and knives and glasses and stuff all over the place. It was in those settings that I learned really about how to live well -- which fork to use, which glass to use, how to go to a cocktail party, engage in small talk. It was wonderful.

Most of the time I ended up being the only person of color there, but I got back pretty quickly, real pretty quickly. It was odd a few times, particularly in some of those places down around Darien and Fairfield, Connecticut where everyone talked with their teeth clenched. But I learned to really enjoy it, and found out it was pretty easy to meet people if I met them halfway. And had a great deal of fun, and learned about foods and wines and things that I had never had any opportunity to experience as a kid.

INTERVIEWER: Can I ask, did that sort of launch your interest in cooking?

COLBERT: Launched my interest in cooking at a very high level. Launched my interest in food in a very high level. I remember saying to my mom that I'd really like -- my mom was actually a good cook, and her sisters were excellent cooks. I said I really should learn something about cooking. So she sent me a Fanny Farmer cookbook and said you go through this and you'll know the basics and the rest is up to you. And that's what I did. I went through that book and started learning the basics of how to cook.

Then along came Julia Child who just changed my entire perspective on food. This sort of wacky giant of a woman who could just do the most amazing things with food, and that really took it to another level and I got really serious about cooking. To this day, I still love to play with food and wine -- I love wines too.

But it was a combination of that group and that group of people who were introducing me to a lifestyle that I'd only sort of read about and seen glimpses of in movies, et cetera, and there I was in it. And realizing that with this high level of food that was being brought out, hey, I can do that. I can do this, and began to cook, which opened up even new social avenues.

INTERVIEWER: So after you graduated, did you take some time off?

COLBERT: No. No, in fact, if there was one mistake I made was to leave graduate school without having finished writing my dissertation. I was about two-thirds written, and then I ran into a glitch, which ultimately turned out to have been a programming error that it took months to find. A simple minus 1 where there should have been a plus 1 buried in an equation. It took months and months to find this.

But I had been offered a job at Northeastern on the faculty. I was really under some pressure from the department to take it -- that was the job of the year for everybody. I thought maybe I ought to stay and finish this thing and then go, but everybody kept saying it'll only take you a couple of months to finish up. Well, no. Once I got to Northeastern and found it was on a quarter system, and I was teaching, I quickly became a teaching drone. Four courses a quarter. Four courses a quarter. No graduate assistance whatsoever, an imperative to start up a research lab, and oh, by the way, finish up that dissertation. The dissertation quickly dropped into the background. It wasn't until spring of '73. The fall of '72 I left. Spring of '73 I realized I need to get this thing done.

So I remember taking a rowboat out -- I lived in Canton at the time -- and I took a little rowboat out to the middle of this little lake and dropped the anchor there and I sat there and forced myself to finish writing my dissertation. I got to Brown with my completed dissertation to hand in five minutes after the office closed. It was in May of '73, and they wouldn't open that door for anybody. I ended up having to wait another year, which really ticked me off. They get all the people in an office, they would not open that door. So, formally, I finished in '74, but everybody was involved knew that I finished in '73 and should have finished in '72. But by that time I was teaching.

I never went to my graduation. In fact, it was in the middle of a lecture, and I kind of looked up and said to my class, oh, I think Brown is having its commencement and I'm formally being given my diploma today, and the crowd applauded and I just went back to my lecture. A few years later I had them send it. So that was a mistake not to do that, not to go to that. It was a mistake to leave before absolutely finishing everything. It was a mistake not to go to my commencement, because I never got that closure. It was a mistake to take that job at Northeastern because it was not a good place for me. Huge, too many students in a class, no support for junior faculty whatsoever. I found out that they really weren't interested in my field, which by that time had become cognitive psychology. And that the people of interest, the people doing stuff that I was interested in were here at MIT in the psychology department.

So I wandered across the river one day. I just get really frustrated because I couldn't talk to the faculty rat and pigeon runners in my department. So I wandered across the river and looked up Molly Potter in the psychology department, it was in building E-10. The building doesn't exist anymore, they're building the annex or a new part of the Weisner Building, the new building there. But the little psych department was there. I wandered into her office and introduced myself. She had no idea who I was. I remember her telling me well, I have about a half an hour. Three hours later we were still sitting there talking and we worked out some joint research with a graduate student named Barbara Ertel, and really saved my sanity. I was actually going bananas over at Northeastern feeling I'd made all the wrong decisions, was in the wrong place, I don't want my career to go like this, I'm not going to stay at this place for tenure, I don't like these people. On and on and on and on.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have the thought you were going to turn back in Baltimore?

COLBERT: Oh, they wanted me to come back. I have to give the Hopkins' faculty due credit. They'd been watching my career, watching me silently, and they said come back, come back, we'd love to have you on the faculty. They had me come down and give a seminar, and gave this wonderful party afterwards, just an amazing party afterwards. The only problem was my folks live a stone's throw from campus. I love my family but they're overwhelming and there was no way I was going back to Baltimore to be that close. Four hundred miles has been just far enough. Those who know me well know that my mother and I are both very strong-willed people, and we've struggled for decades.

So there was no way I was going back home, even though I greatly to this day, I appreciate the effort that Hopkins made to try to get me to come back. Instead I came here. I came here actually not to do research as I thought I was going to do. I came here to do a consulting job. So I had this opportunity to be senior consultant and trainer in the Office of Personnel Development. It's now called OED, Office of Employee Development. It was called Office of Personnel Development, OPD then. I thought well this will be a nice opportunity to sort of figure out what I really wanted to do with myself. Maybe go back to Hopkins, maybe go on somewhere else. But spend a couple of years doing this, have MIT on my resume, it'll look good. They'll spit me out in a couple of years, because it's a tough place.

INTERVIEWER: What had you heard about MIT before you had come here?

COLBERT: Nerds and geeks. Those were the first two things, nerds and geeks. Intense. Absolutely intense, and all focused around engineering. Those were the things that I had heard. Poorly socialized individuals. I heard all those things about MIT. And brilliant, brilliant misfits all over the place. Of course, when I came here I didn't find much of the sort. Of course, there was some. The place was so poorly understood from outside. What I found was that I had fallen into, stumbled into a place that was just right for me. It was just very clear that if you have ideas, energy, willing to work hard, willing to engage other people, try to build bridges, it's a wonderful place. Very affirming. Very entrepreneurial. Celebrating ideas. I just found wow, this is great.

INTERVIEWER: This was in 1977?

COLBERT: '77.

INTERVIEWER: What was the campus, what was the atmosphere like?

COLBERT: It was a much smaller place. It was really a small place. Kendall Square was hardly developed. In fact, it was across from E-19 now, where Legal Sea Food is now. There was an old electroplating factory there, electroplating business there. There was one restaurant up the street towards the river, it was the F & T Diner. I used to go in and joke about, I'd like a hamburger and I'll take my cup of grease on the side, please. But everybody was there.

There were fewer students at the time, certainly fewer graduate students. In fact, the balance was more towards undergraduates than graduates, and certainly the feel was undergraduate. The administration was smaller and very tight. I use this in a good word -- paternalistic, but in a good way. People cared about one another. They wanted to know who you were. You expected to get to know people, and to do it kind of independently and aggressively. So I spent much of my first year making the rounds of people, just introducing myself and saying what do you do, how can I help you? It was easy to get to know people that way. And the work that I did for OPD were mostly at Lincoln Labs doing a training program, that since became known -- that became called charm school.

As much as they tried to be snide about it, it really changed that place. And along the way doing these training programs out there, I came into contact with and worked with most of the senior officers at MIT, so they got to see me in action. I got to meet John Wynn and Jim Culliton and Constantine Semonides. My goodness, Jerry Wiesner was president then. Walter Rosenblith was provost. Bill Dickson was running plant at the time, and eventually became EVP, executive vice president. But I got to know them all. Then where my offices were, I got to see them every day and interact with them every day, and thought this is a fun group of people.

INTERVIEWER: Where were your offices?

COLBERT: Let's see. When I first came here we were in E-19. But then in '79, John Wynn, who was then vice president for administration and personnel convinced me to stay, and said come work with me and you'll get to see an organization like MIT from the top-down. Now that was an irresistible lure.

So I went over to work with John, and his office was upstairs now where Sue Lester and the corporation offices are on the second floor of Building 7. I went up there to work with John, and Jim Culliton was his assistant at the time, eventually becoming director of HR, and then eventually vice president for financial operations. So Jim was there. Across the hall was the VP for research, Tom Jones, who was this delightful Southern gentleman. He passed away, unfortunately, a few years later, but he was a delightful Southern gentleman right across the hallway. I mean a gentleman in a real old sense of the word. Whenever I'd go to see Tom, whatever the business was, you always had to sit a spell and talk about something else and get around to the business. But he was a really nice guy. Ken Smith from chemical engineering was VP for research at the time, and he was right around the corner.

I really got to interact with all these people. My title then was assistant equal opportunity officer, so I had another reason to go make the rounds and talk to people and get involved with Academic Council members. I met this interesting guy named Constantine, who by anybody's definition was a force. In terms of his personality, very warm, inviting, European-style personality. His work ethic, the man was just -- he used to carry two suitcases, he just had his hand at everything all the time. It was very clear to me instantly, here's a man who the faculty respects and listens to, and the administration respects and listens to, and he was right in the middle as the translator between these two camps, and he was in the president's office. Really interesting guy.

Well, six months after I went to work for John, he told me he was retiring. He's the one who gave me this notion. I said to John, why did you lure me over here and you're retiring? He told me, if I told you, you wouldn't have stayed. He's right. But he had gotten me into the habit of coming in at 7:30 in the mornings, because I had an opportunity, John was an early riser, he would always get here, he'd have coffee sitting in his office. I'd arrive and grab some coffee and go sit and talk with him. I just learned so much about MIT -- the people, the organizations, his take on issues and problems, et cetera.

Then he would talk about himself a bit. He had decided that when he reached 60, he wanted to do something different with the rest of his life. And I thought, oh this is an interesting idea. What he ended up doing was going to work with his wife who was a tennis professional who had a store down at Fenueil Hall, and I think in Chestnut Hill also for tennis and after tennis clothes. He went to be her financial person just to work with her and have some fun. I said to myself, hmm..., now that sounds like a good idea and 60 would be a good time to do it.

We talked a little bit about that, and he said to me, if you're going to do this, you better start saving. This was consistent with what my mom had said to me. Save aggressively till it hurts and put it where you can't get it. John reinforced that. He said if you want to do something independent with your life at 60, you have to be financially prepared to do it. Or at least know that you have a floor under you that will keep you financially secure. I never forgot that, and I started to save really aggressively, and then the rest-- I'm doing okay now.

But John left in March of 1980, and then my role was reassigned to Constantine, and I went to work with Constantine and that was just an amazing experience. He was such a character. He knew everybody, he was into everything, he had a vision of people in life that was very affirming. I think he embodied all of the good virtues of this organization that made me want to stay and be a part of it. And he was a mentor, and I found myself with several mentors with Constantine and Jim Culliton and Bill Dickson. What a group of mentors. You can't have a better bunch than that, people who are in your corner. I was getting along very well with the provost. Walter Rosenblith had a reputation as being a fire-breathing dragon, but I just found him to be a very, very nice man, and could go talk to him about whatever was on my mind and he was always gracious.

INTERVIEWER: So the first project you worked on was computerizing--

COLBERT: Actually, before that, what led to that was '79 to '81 when I was working for John and then Constantine was a period when the Department of Labor was very aggressive about compliance reviews, affirmative action compliance reviews. MIT had always, up to that point, had been generating its data in a particular format that was understandable for and suitable to MIT internally, but was completely orthogonal to the way the Feds wanted to see data. Of course, being MIT, big powerful MIT, we were able to hold out for a long time and say this is the way we do it. Finally, the Feds said no, we want it this way. So I embarked on a project, and it turns out, a young man from Sloan who was doing a Master's degree, came over and wanted to work with me on it. He just came out of the blue, his name is Kevin Lonnie, L- O- N- N- I- E.

So Kevin came over, and the two of us embarked on what turned out to be a year-long project to re-cast all of MIT's staff and employees by hand from our classification system into the EEO6 classification scheme. We had to go through everybody, re-classify them, put them in matrices, et cetera, and then eventually have that computerized. That was like doing another dissertation. We did it by hand. I look back and I've still got the thing down there and I flip through this thing every once in a while, and think how absolutely crazy we were to have done this. But Kevin got his Master's degree and I got the -- you know, again, it was one of those impossible things. So out of it, it was very clear that HR systems needed to be jiggered. And of course, Constantine basically looked at me and said well, go do it.

There had been a project over there to computerize the HR records process, but the process was behind schedule and very, very significantly over-budget. When I talked to the man, George Patovich who had been trying to get that system up and running, it became instantly clear to me this isn't a technology issue, this is an issue of management. Somebody has to decide what we're going to do or not do. Plus there were two offices, there were two records office -- a faculty records office and a personnel records office. The faculty records office was this little elite group, every time you walked in you were looked at suspiciously, what do you want and why are you here. This is a faculty records office.

Across the hall was the personnel records office, which was comprised of a bunch of clerks, low- level clerks who were not trusted to do anything. They had phones, they couldn't dial out of the institution, they were in this horrible area without outside windows. There was a sink and counter in there, and everybody would bring their dirty dishes and dump them in that sink and expect those clerks to clean them up. I kind of looked at all that and said, oh, I'll take care of this.

So the first thing to do was to combine the two offices into one operation without firing anybody. I decided I wasn't going to fire anybody, even though there was tremendous resistance from the faculty records office to change. I just kept working with them and finally reorganized -- actually, the person who was running that office, I saw another opportunity that I thought would better utilize this person's skills in another place in HR, and got the other manager to agree to take her. It turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to her. I combined these two operations into one office, brought in computers at that point. They were word processors. Digital had a wonderful bunch of word processors at that time that were state-of-the-art at the time and brought those in, trained staff to use those things.

Cut that sink in half, and basically said to the rest of HR, the rest of the department, you bring your dirty dishes here one more time and I'm taking the whole damn sink out. No, no, no. That people were not going to be cleaning your dishes. If I see dirty dishes there again, it goes. You can't do that. You can't do that. This is my office now, and that got cleaned up, and of course, my staff thought I was a hero. I had the phones changed so that they were A-class phones. And I basically said to people I don't expect you all to be calling home and boyfriends and calling in here all the time, I expect you to use this responsibly. And they said oh, yeah, we only wanted to be treated like everybody else.

I redecorated the place. Brought in plants -- went over to, I don't think it was called then, I don't remember, but it was the odd collection and had some of my staff come over and pick out artworks, and we bought them and put them up on the wall, and gave my staff respect. Because they were producing all of the appointment letters for everybody. They were working like dogs and weren't being treated well. And started hiring a more diverse group, because it was an entry level at MIT, and I found very quickly that people wanted to hire my staff away. They were well-trained. Once I brought those word processors in and in a couple of months they knew how to word process documents, these people were in demand. And that was great.

So that worked out well. Then from those two, from reorganizing and getting that system up and running, by basically making decisions about what bells and whistles we would have and not have, I came into the orbit of Jim Bruce and his crew. Jim Bruce and Marilyn McMillan and Cecilia d'Oliveira and others. By that time, early '80s, the IBM PC came on the market. Jim Culliton bought me an IBM PC. I never forgot when that thing landed on my desk, and wow. Jim was the director of HR at the time, and I promptly called up some of the guys from IS who were upstairs, down to the office, and let's open this thing, let's see what's inside it. So we promptly took the thing apart and put it back together again and saw how little was in there. I think it had the blazing speed of seven megahertz, which was just astonishing back then -- seven megahertz, my gosh.

So I learned DOS, started playing with the thing and programming it, et cetera, and because I was one of the first administrators around here to do this, I quickly became the guru. A lot of people were getting them, but Isaac had his machine, let's call him. The next thing you knew the phone kept ringing and people were asking me how to do this, this and that, so I became a savvy user. Jim Bruce and his crew and I used to talk about the future of these things. We said these things are going to be everywhere. These things are going to replace mainframes as we know them. Why shouldn't MIT get out ahead on this.

So Jim and Marilyn and Cecelia and I went to Bill Dickson, who by then was EVP, and convinced him to give us some money so that we could go off on the side and develop a strategic plan for administrative computing. I remember Bill looking at us quite askance. He didn't quite know whether we were crazy or stupid or what, but he knew we were convinced that we were onto something. And Jim was director of IS at the time. He gave us some money and we went off and squirreled ourselves away for four months I think it was, mostly at Jim's house. We developed a strategic plan for administrative computing that put these things on everybody's desk. When we came back with that plan, they bought it -- to my shock and amazement they bought it.

INTERVIEWER: The year was?

COLBERT:

This was '84. We started in '83, we finished it in '84, maybe it was '85, but it was '84. Because then it took a while to get things in place. One of the implications for the plan was that the main administrative computing systems had to change. At that time, everybody had a big mainframe -- purchasing, that's Barry. Director of purchasing had his big mainframe for all the purchasing stuff. Financial operations had its big mainframes -- mainframes, because everybody had something.

The controller's office had something, accounts payable had something, accounts receivable had something else. Payroll, the investments area, all of them had their own machines and none of them cared about whether they were talking to the other one. They were basically all throwing data over the wall to the next one to let them handle it. It was a kind of a bit of a chaos. We knew that had to change. Guess who got asked to go over and coral that? By that time Jim Culliton had become vice president for financial operations. He had been a big supporter of the strategic plan.

So a few of us got sent out to various areas to create additional change. The change that I knew was needed over in the financial operations area was to get them to work together in acquiring and modifying strategic financial computing systems. I mean these were all 800 pound gorillas. I'm sitting there how am I going to make this happen? So the first thing I did was convince Jim to give me all the money, that, in fact, nobody could make a major computing purchase without my recommending it to vice president. Okay, so everybody kind of knew okay, here's this little guy, comes over and we gotta go through him. So day one on the job, I move back over to E-19 -- no, actually my office wasn't in E-19, it was up on Building 8, right across the hall from Margaret MacVicar, as a matter of fact, was how I got to know Margaret about the work was E-19.

Day one on the job, I went to talk to the controller. I think Phil Keohan, he was controller. Phil was a tough guy. He was a real tough guy. He had this huge operation and he ran it with an iron fist. So I went in to introduce myself, and he knew I wanted to talk with him about my new role, et cetera. I noticed he kept the door wide open, which was unusual, and his staff was outside of the office. And Phil started to yell at me saying young man, you coming over here, you think you're going to make change and da-da-da, well--. He's yelling, I'm not going to take any shit out you. I said to myself, oh, I see what this is.

So I got my street on and I yelled right back at him and said I'm not going anywhere, you're going to have to work with me. I used a term that I don't use very often, and I said if you and the other mmm... want to play rough, I'll play rough too. I yelled at the top of my voice and all these people heard it. And I understood what this was. This was Phil saying to his staff and showing to his staff that I was willing to stand up to him, and if I was willing to stand up to him, toe-to-toe with him then maybe we could get things done. I realized that, but at the time I kind of thought well maybe I've also just lost my job on the first day.

So I went over to talk to Jim about it. Jim looked at me, he said, what did you say? I told him what I said. And he said oh, well I bet you got his attention, didn't you? Actually things went just fine after that. But it was Phil making a demonstration that I was not going to be a pushover. It took me a second to understand that.

So, the long and short of it was that to get what I needed done, I knew it would be impossible if I try to go head-to-head with everybody. You couldn't order these guys to do things, it didn't make sense because these were all powers in their own right. The thing to do was to get them to come to the table together. So my trick was to create a council and call all of their computer people and the managers to regular meetings.

The agenda of the meetings that I set was to talk about their systems and their visions for modifying or moving their systems to another place. It took maybe five minutes for things to take off. I think it was director of purchasing who started talking about buying a digital mainframe -- I think he was going to buy a Bull computer. I'd say he hardly got the word out of his mouth before somebody else started saying, why are you going to do that? Why are you going to do something like that? Why aren't you talking to me about this? If you do that there is going to be the impact on me, and others started chiming in. All I did was moderate the discussion.

It wasn't long before they all began to say well, what if I do this and what if I do that, what would you do. They began to quickly see that they were collaborating and cooperating in a way they never had before. I knew I had won this one when about a year later -- this was late '86 or early '87. So I got invited out to a golf game with the boys. Now I don't know one end of a golf club from another and they knew that, but they invited me out to the golf course and got me up there to tee-off. They were all standing around, they were watching. And some of these guys are really good golfers. They just knew I was going to make a total fool of myself and so did I. It got to be absolutely hilarious, actually. Even I was cracking up. Because I'm swinging at these balls, and when it did hit something it would go flopping back some way or the other. After I sufficiently embarrassed myself, it was clear that I'd just been inducted into the group, and we've all had a good laugh about that ever since, and became really good friends with those guys. Really good colleagues.

INTERVIEWER: After you graduated with your PhD, did you have any aspirations for teaching or researching?

COLBERT: None. Well, I certainly didn't expect my career to go like this. You know, the computer stuff were the toys of my field, the new toys of my field. I didn't have an intrinsic interest in them. It was okay, I need know something about these to get something done. And I did, I learned what I needed to learn. But when I got here and folks saw I knew my way around a computer, that just took me off in an entirely different direction.

So it was around '87 or so that I was getting calls from outside of MIT with head hunters interested in somebody to run an information center or computer centers, et cetera. I was thinking to myself, no. No, this is not what I want.

INTERVIEWER: You were working with Jim Bruce, Bill Dickson, and everything. The fact that you had a PhD from Brown--

COLBERT: Yeah, that helped.

INTERVIEWER: --You had that expertise completely different than what you were working on, was that a point of contention?

COLBERT: No. Having The PhD opened more doors. One of the things about MIT, that I think is true at MIT is having a doctorate suggests that you can run a project, you can learn things quickly, and maybe you can be flexible. There was never much interest in what I had the PhD in, except the psychology department, they were always at me to come back to the fold. But I was doing more fun things at the time.

No, I think having a PhD just sort of said something to everybody about the kind of education one has, the kind of experiences one is likely to have had, and something about a level of capability to run a complex project, to make an original contribution to something, and to be able to learn fast. Until I came to this office, no one was quite so interested in the psychology part of it, and they misinterpreted it anyway, they always thought it was psychology with a couch, not research.

So, here's where Margaret MacVicar comes in. This is an amazing place. I had this office across from Margaret MacVicar, this physicist who was tenured at school level, and she had been busily creating and building this UROP program, which I thought was just an absolutely wonderful idea. Margaret was very direct, very direct, no nonsense kind of woman. Really nice person, but she always had an agenda -- always had an agenda with something.

We talked and we would talk and chat in the hallway a little bit, and I thought, wow, this is a very smart person. Then I found out she had cancer, several cancers, and saw her being incredibly effective and focused despite that. I thought, wow, I'm looking at a hero in here. She never let it get in her way. She really never let it get in her way. I just really respected her for that, because it was clear that she was in pain, and just never let it get in the way.

Then there was one day in the hallway, this was 1987, maybe '88, somewhere late '87. I'm standing in the hallway having a conversation with Jim Culliton and Joan Rice, and she walks up to us. It was a strange little conversation, said you're Isaac, aren't you? I said yeah, my office is across the hallway from you. And said, you used to be an academic, weren't you? I said well, I taught over at Northeastern and did some research. Yeah, yeah, yeah, you ever thought about going back to the academic side of the house? I said well, if you mean teaching again, I'd have to go back to graduate school. I've been out of this for too long. I'd have to go back to graduate school. Oh, there are other things you can do. Then she turned around and walked away. Now that was weird. Joan said, she's probably got something in mind, just hold your breath.

So some months later I got this call from Frank Perkins, who I had worked with in the strategic plan. One of my tasks in the process of the strategic plan was to head a group looking at the future of telecommunications, and this faculty member, Frank, joined the group. He didn't know anything about communications, I didn't know much more, but we had the IT people who were more than happy to educate us about it, with Schiller and the whole group. Great group of quintessential nerds just delighted to educate us about telecommunication stuff, and wow did we learn a lot really quickly.

Frank threw himself at it, I threw myself at it, we both had a wonderful time and got to know each other. Well, he tells me later that he had this conversation with Margaret about getting me over here to help reorganize the graduate school. So Frank called me and told me that John Turner, my predecessor, was going to be leaving, and he'd like me to consider coming over as associate dean to run the office. I knew John Turner quite well. John had focused on minority graduate student recruitment to some great effect, but that wasn't what I wanted to deal with. I said to Frank, I'm not coming over there to be the black dean. If that's what you want, I'm not interested in that. I think there are other things I can do. He said yeah, I know. I'm not interested in you being the black dean either, I'm interested in having somebody come over to help change this office. I thought about it, we talked for a little while about what he really wanted, and he really wanted this office to become more student centered. That meant some massive changes in what the work was.

So I came over here in the summer of '88, and I walked into our office, there was absolutely a wash in paper. It was just mind-boggling to me. All of the RA and TA appointments and changes and petitions, all of that was coming into this office. So students couldn't get paid unless their paperwork was processed, and it was all coming into two desks here. There were too dumb terminals tied to a mainframe here, first relic of the past. Of course, all the paperwork came in at the last minute, they were always lines of angry students outside the door, they hadn't gotten paid. It was something had gone wrong. The office was being viewed as a roadblock. I saw this, okay, this is going to have to change.

So I came in and I did a TQM exercise. I wanted to know everything about the operation of this office and the paperwork and the flow and the why and the wherefore who gets it, why do they get this paper, why is there a seven-part form, who gets it, why do they need this, how does this work get done, how does it originate in departments and come here. What quickly became apparent was that we needed a new computer system that captured the information out where it was generated. So I pushed for that pretty quickly. And thus, NIT's eventually came. What that did was free up my staff.

In fact, in designing this, I was very much involved in designing the first implementation of NIT's, and one of the key requirements for me was to have the system repeat it. 95 percent of the stuff people put in is right, it's just a small percentage you have to deal with. I wanted flags put in the system. I didn't want anybody to have to look at every appointment and every change. What I wanted was flags set in the system so that if entries fell outside of certain parameters, then those things would come to the office with one of the clerks and it was something to look at. Of course, reality is that it's about 2 percent of stuff, maybe 1 percent -- 1 and a half, 2 percent of stuff really is a problem. So there were some educational departments, they could no longer blame us if students didn't get paid because you didn't put in your stuff, if you didn't put it in, don't blame us.

So it cleared up the staff to start doing other things -- to start developing programs for student support, to open the office for students who wanted to come in and talk about anything, problems, issues, et cetera. Suddenly the dean and I were available, and students -- you know, the administration wants to talk to us? First it was the administration wants to talk to us, we must be in trouble. But the administration wants to talk to us, and they began to come in and realize that we could be an adjunctive resource to the department, especially for issues and problems that many students didn't feel comfortable about surfacing in the departments. We just became more student-centered, more student-centered.

Then came re-engineering. To this day I don't know whether that was a mistake or not -- yes I do, yes I do. There were some aspects of it that were a mistake and some that were inevitable. But I got asked to be one of the eight core team members for re-engineering administrative systems here.

INTERVIEWER: Who are the others?

COLBERT: Let's see, there was Steve Scarano -- oh my gosh, me, Steve Scarano-- oh my gosh, he's down at NYU, Jim Bruce's -- Marilyn McMillan. God, for financial area. Wow, you're testing my memory now. I can't remember all of us now. Jill. I gotta go back in and look at it now, but there were eight of us. Then there was a Steering Committee with Bill Dickson and Jim Bruce and Constantine and Joan Rice was on the Steering Committee. Basically senior officers were on the Steering Committee, and we were off with Jim Champ's consulting firm looking at "low hanging fruit" and how we were going to change how administrative work got done.

Well, my assignment in this, as we began to clearly see that culture was going to change here, and that there were some ways of doing business here that had to change. My assignment was to interact with the faculty on this. I was a communications person. Faculty at first was saying this is all that administrative stuff, we don't have to be concerned about that. Leave us alone. My job was to go around and say hey, folks, there's some things you need to know about re-engineering, how we do work.

Well, let me give you an example. How do you get your mail delivered now? It turns out that everybody used to get their mail delivered right to their desks by a mail carrier who they all came to know -- it was a very personal, labor intensive kind of thing, but it was part of the way MIT operated -- you know, it was care and feeding. Well, you're going to have to go downstairs to the mail center and get your mail. The reaction was, what? Why should we have to do this? Because this is more effective. So don't say re-engineering isn't going to affect you. Your office isn't going to be cleaned every day anymore. It's going to be cleaned on a schedule. And so the little changes that had a big psychological impact on faculty and staff. My job was to make people understand that this is something they need to pay attention to, something they needed to comment on, have a oar in the water on, because it was going to affect all of MIT.

Of course, two things happened for me. One was that I got lots of spears in the chest. It was sort of well, we appreciate you telling us this, this isn't about you, but ugh. But the second thing was that I got to have many, many conversations with faculty and the departments in groups and alone, and they found out the way I operate that I tell them what I knew, what I know -- I never lie to them, I will never lie to you. I may not know the answer or something or I may not know everything about this, but what I know I'm prepared to tell you. You can always double-check to make sure. I made sure I never told anybody anything that wasn't true to the best of my knowledge. There were some questions they asked about financial details that I just couldn't answer. But I knew a lot, and I always laid it out to them. I think that just built my credibility with faculty, which paid off later.

But re-engineering changed the place, and it has not changed it for the better. For that I'm a little sorry about. There is one aspect that I think has been for the better and that's financial systems. We really did need to fully integrate our financial systems, and SAP was the right answer, but there was a whole lot of blood on the floor with that, and major changes in how work gets done and who's doing it to a less personal attention to people, which has been an important part of the culture at MIT. That you could call somebody and you know that that person knew you and knew your organization, rather than dealing with some system or being sent through telephone trees with pre-select answers, et cetera.

What began to change when things began to change was this sort of personal attention to people. Of course, the other thing that was changing at the same time was the place was just exploding, research was just exploding here. The number of graduate students growing by leaps and bounds. The research enterprises were in the labs just getting bigger and more complicated, more postdocs coming in. More of this, more of that, more of everything except faculty. The faculty size has stayed pretty stable. But the enterprise was just growing and becoming much more complex.

The other thing that was changing pretty rapidly, too, was federal reporting requirements. Just a sheer amount of drudgery and paperwork to do anything was just drowning everybody and it still is actually. Just much more oversight about everything and much more ridiculous reporting and certifying about this, that and the other. Just a nightmare and there's no end in sight to that. But collectively we put all that stuff together really has changed the feel of the place.

Of course, the look of the place has been changing as we've been putting up some interesting new structures, some of which I like, some of which I think are abysmal. I think the culture here has shifted a lot. People point to re-engineering as being the trip wire for that of making the place more corporate, but I think those who went through it have that in mind as the seminal event in MIT changing, but it really was a host of things coming together at the same time. Some of which, even though the faculty are complaining about it, they voted what they feel on -- the treadmill of research, bigger groups, more, more, more. Creating a men's program, dramatically expanding the program, more graduate students, more, more, more. You can't blame that on the administration.

But there's plenty of blame to go around with how the place has evolved and the gradual diminution of what most people recall, the long timers recall as a nurturing place where the individual really counts, where you can reach out to the right person to respond to any problem or need. That ethic still exists here and there's still this interest in who's the person to call for this? I've got an issue, who do I call on that one. But it's less and less possible to do that these days. So, that was re-engineering.

Then after re-engineering, it was '93 to almost '95, Frank Perkins who was then the dean decided he was going to retire. He had been dean for about 13 years at that point and he was ready to retire. He gave a full year of notification for that, and by the time Chuck was president, and nobody believed him. Nobody believed Frank was going to retire. So they really didn't do anything about it. He was going to leave on September 1st. It was August 15th before the organization realized Frank was serious, and he'd been saying all along I'm retiring, I'm not staying, I'm not going to be convinced to stay on any longer. You better start thinking about an interim dean, an acting dean. It wasn't till mid August that he really was finally taken seriously, and Chuck called me up to the office and asked if I would serve as acting dean for the Fall term of 1995-'96 while they figured out what to do.

INTERVIEWER: So you were acting dean of?

COLBERT: I was acting dean of the graduate school. This office has had several million changes. For years the title was dean of the graduate school and this was called the graduate school office, but MIT's never had a graduate school. Then it became dean for graduate education, then it became dean for graduate students. The committee was formed, headed by Steve Tannenbaum, who has then in toxicology and is now in bioengineering, and then Hobbs, others, who were part of the committee. I came to know what the committee recommend, but I was never allowed to see the report. The committee recommended that the Institute take a jog to the side and have someone who was not a member of a faculty be dean, me. The provost at the time wasn't having it.

INTERVIEWER: Mark Wrighton?

COLBERT: No. Mark had just left. Michael left in '95 to become chancellor of -- goodness -- Washington U, Washington U in Saint Louis, and then Joel Moses became provost. There's another model of this kind of operation is having the vice president for research also be dean for graduate matters. Many places across the country have that. Many find that it's a challenge. Dave Litzer was vice president for research and he was asked to take on the title of dean for graduate education. Now, the VP for research has something like 20 direct reports. So, all the big labs and centers. Dave promptly turned to me and said, I'm not doing this job. I've got more than enough on my plate. You're the dean. I don't have time to go to meetings, I don't have time to do these things. He was really serious about this that he knew it was a serious job that needed attention, and given what was going on in research with this continued rapid growth in research, and all of these federal issues around funding and stuff coming, and legislation coming up, that that's where his attention had to be.

So I ran the Committee on Graduate School Programs. I had the money, had full authority in the office, everything, my title was senior associate dean. I went through this period with the CGSP. Committee of Graduate School Programs is a huge committee, it was a huge committee comprised of a faculty representative from every department or degree granting program and it had been a place for years. So it had gotten up to about 35, a committee of 35 or so. So I was setting agenda and going to the meetings, and the faculty were -- they quite accepted me, but we had this regular little drama go on.

I'd start the meeting, and somebody, usually Gordon, usually -- I won't say who it was -- but usually somebody would say, okay, Dean Colbert, will this be the time that we'll be graced with the presence of Dean Litzer? They wanted to see okay, what kind of excuse did we come up with this time? I said well, the vice president has a lot of things on his plate and I'm afraid he's got an agenda down in Washington today, and blah-blah-blah, they'd kind of look at each other and look at me and go hmm..., and then we'd go into meeting. The next month somebody would ask me the same question. There's smiles all around, so what you going to say now? It just went on and on, but it was very clear that I was being fully accepted as the dean.

Finally, when the day that Bob Brown and Larry Bacow were named provost and chancellor -- Larry had been chair of the faculty, and had become a friend, Larry came down to my office to say I have something to tell you. I looked at him and said, you're not telling me you're going to leave MIT, are you? He said no, I've just been made the chancellor of MIT. What? He said Bob and I talked and the first thing we're going to do, you've been the dean for some years, the faculty recognize you as the dean, we've talked to Dave Litzer about this, and you're going to be the dean. I was overwhelmed. Then the rest is history, and then I began to figure out my agenda. Well, I knew what my agenda would be if I ever had the title, but it was to create a life for graduate students outside of the labs. That's what became my agenda.

INTERVIEWER: Having all these administrative turf battles, struggles, clashes of ideologies, the fact that you were in an administrative post in an institution where faculty were not thought to be administrators, you're not a faculty member, did that ever come up as a point of contention--?

COLBERT: No, it never came up as a point of contention. I think it's because I built my street credibility with the faculty over a period of years through the re-engineering stuff, through just being the dean and helping solve a lot of problems, making the office student-centered. I think I had the street credibility at that point. They did not have a problem. Plus they had seen me in action with the CGSP. I used to talk with the senior most faculty on that committee one-on-one occasionally, and said look, you know, I need to know from you guys if you're having any problems with decisions that I make, or the issues. And they said no, no. So I'd like to come you all and talk to you about the act with power, act with power -- it became three words that I kind of came to dislike, you know, act with power.

I came to dislike them because on the one hand it was a wonderful show of confidence and support that we trust you. But on the other hand, with a committee so huge, you don't get the kind of collaboration and thinking about things. You know, acting with power's wonderful, but it's much better to act in close collaboration with faculty. So it was clear that that committee structure had to change. If you have a committee of 35, you have a committee of one, whoever's running it. So that had to change.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you mentioned that your style, it's easy enough to forgive--

COLBERT: Well, yeah. One of the things around here that's important is to you have to have a vision and you have to have the strength of your conviction around things, and not necessarily wait for everybody to say this is all right to go ahead and do something that you know is right to do, and let the rest catch up with you on this. That it's easier to get forgiveness than permission to go and do this. The example is my agenda for graduate life here.

I told you what a wonderful time I had in graduate school and I thought this is the way it should be. Looking at this incredibly talented and hardworking often visionary group of graduate students here, it became clear that while they're getting a lot of attention in the departments, there's something that they're missing. They're missing a piece that would give them more opportunities for what I call priceless encounters outside of the lab that might, in fact, spark some important aspect of their careers and their lives. Because often, the most important things that happen in graduate school have nothing to do with the lab.

We've got this international, now very diverse group of people who are going to operate on the world's stage, and they need to know each other. We need to create programs and venues opportunities for them to meet, both in structured settings and in unstructured settings, so that they could learn from each other and contribute to one another's development. That's just something that compliments everything in the department.

Well, I kind of made this case in an Academic Council meeting one day, and the provost looks at me and says, what are you talking about, Isaac, we bring them here to work. You know, general laughter. I took that as a challenge. Okay, I'm being told to leave them alone. It's not right to leave them alone. So I embarked on my campaign to bring the data to the table, to bring the advocacy agenda to the fore with alumni, with current graduate students, with my staff, and with allies in another departments whose work serves graduate students to make very clear we gotta do things differently.

Alumni gave me the first opportunity to do this. They bought into this very quickly and for a very good reason. I pointed out to them when I looked at the numbers, hey folks, the majority of our students are graduate students now. Who's going to be giving in 15 years, 20 years if graduate students are leaving here not feeling connected to the place? That's a pretty persuasive observation. But I wanted to have a quiet exploration of graduate community. We had had this president's report back in '97 or so on graduate student life, and they talked about community for undergraduates. This was in the wake of Scott Krueger's death and Chuck's decision to bring freshman on campus, and all of the wringing of hands around what that meant for the undergraduate community. I'm sitting here thinking wait a minute, community means something for graduate students too because they don't have one. But I wanted to test the proposition. What does it mean? What might it mean for you?

So, alumni arranged for me to get to Hong Kong. I had to go give a talk in Shanghai, and I agreed to give that talk if the people who brought me to Shanghai would get me to Hong Kong. The alumni had arranged for me to meet with a whole group of alums. Some Chinese, some x-pat, some just people working in the financial industry there. I got to Hong Kong in this driving rain. I'd never seen rain like that in my life. I'm staying over in Kowloon, bouncing across the harbor on the Star Ferry, thinking oh boy, this is going to be a disaster. It's pouring buckets. Nobody's going to show to this thing, this is a waste of time, but I'll show up.

So I got to the meeting, it was in a big conference room. One of the main drivers of the Alumni Association, Tony -- gosh, what was Tony's last name. I'm forgetting Tony's last name right now, but they arranged for all these people to be at this thing and I kind of thought okay, I'm going to go in there and talk to all two of them. I opened the door and this room was jammed with people and they burst into applause. I thought oh, my gosh. Immediately I was being told no graduate dean had ever talked to them before, nobody had ever singled them out as graduate alumni -- rather they'd all been mixed in with the undergraduates and just sort of ignored, and nobody wanted to listen to what they had to say.

INTERVIEWER: Who are these, like MBAs, PhD's?

COLBERT: The whole mix -- MBAs, PhDs, and a few undergrad alums, too, actually, who were there. My question was what did you come to MIT to get? What did you actually get? What would have made it better for you? In what ways does the notion of community as one of the legs of the triad of research, education and community mean to graduate students? And they just unloaded. I knew I had the right thing, I knew I was on the right track.

So I came back and the Alumni Association, alumni Paul Ozewski, Jim Lash was there, who was head of alumni at the time. They got it right away, they absolutely got it, that there were all these things that MIT could and should do for graduate students to make them feel as connected to the institution as they are to their departments and labs and that that was important down the line. They absolutely got it and they became instant allies.

So we got the president of the Alumni Association, oh boy, yeah. And deep into alumni. The graduate students, of course, were no sweat at all. They saw the need for graduate students to have more resources for life available to them. So they were instant allies. Then there were people in the careers office and other places that saw immediately that there were things to do, things that were important about this agenda. So all this started to come together.

The provost, to his enduring credit, is one of the things I'm always -- I've never failed to appreciate about Bob Brown. As this all began to coalesce, and he saw where this was going, he bought into it and got ahead of it. It was always bring the data to Bobby, he might have a particular point of view in the beginning, but you bring the information to him that shows him, well, maybe I need to think about this again, and he saw this as the right thing to do and Bob became champion for it, which was great because you got the provost in your corner, you have alumni and the graduate students, and administration, great.

INTERVIEWER: At the same time, this being a related topic to get into, what reforms you accomplished that at other universities around the country or late '90s, the turn of that century were running into problems with graduate students wanting--

COLBERT: Unionize, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have a sense that that was something that was afoot or you stayed ahead of the ball?

COLBERT: We stayed ahead. We certainly were keeping our eye on that to see to what extent that might have happened here. One of the things that was very clear to me is why that would not have happened here, even though there were some organizers playing around the edges here. But first of all, we've never used our graduate students as teaching drones. In fact, we paid TA's a premium to TA, because research is the name of the game here. Most students here are RAs or fellowships, so we never had the majority of our, anywhere near majority of our graduate students TAing, and we treated them well.

So, in many, many universities around the country, especially the bigger ones, in fact, graduate students had been used as teaching drones and that's a disservice to them and a distraction from the education as far as I'm concerned. So that wasn't an issue. It's always been extraordinarily difficult to get research staff and people organized or seeing a value of union for them. Of course, our students are very smart and they do their homework very thoroughly, and they of course, looked at what's happened with those schools in which graduate students have become unionized. They've lost ground. They've lost money. They've lost resources, et cetera. It hasn't been a boon to them. And they're paying these union dues, they're not getting anything from it.

So our students are very smart -- they see when something's not useful for them. So I was never seriously concerned that our students might unionize. But I'm certainly willing to use that to call up the spectre of that from time to time as the bête noir in the background just in case we didn't move on making our graduate students better. But it was never really seriously an issue here.

A real serious issue was how do we get our graduate students to be more invested in the institution. One, was we needed to have them living on campus instead of scattered out in these communities increasingly far away. We needed to find ways to get more faculty involved with our students outside of the lab, so that meant some residency. We needed to have programmable community spaces where programs could happen, and that meant something about the kinds of structures we would build and the funding structure and the income streams from them. A community room doesn't generate rent, so it's an issue.

But what we've done along the way to build residence halls that were the early envy of our peers. They would send spies around to see what we're doing, seeing that we were willing to invest in residence halls that focused on community. Large amounts of community facilities and resources, and we'll build our dorms around that. Harvard, Stanford, others came out to look at us and marvel that MIT was willing to make that kind of investment. I'm just as good as I can get. And that really kept the ball rolling.

Back in the early '90s, as the graduate students in this office, started a mantra of 2,000 beds in 2000. That was when the grad school was a little smaller then and 2,000 beds would have housed half of our students. The notion was to house 50 percent of our graduate students on campus. It goes by 2000. We were still behind the curve on the number of beds, but we're pretty much there now, we're almost there now. That co-advocacy has kept this ball rolling. Now it's self-sustaining.

The next big event that really has helped move it forward was, in a strange way, the institution of the student life fee, because that gave this office, certainly, a stable funding mechanism for what I chose to do was to set up a process to experiment in community building. I always figured I think I'd know it when I see it, but one, I'm a lot older than everybody else, and they don't need some old fart trying to tell them what would be good for building a graduate community here, and what would be right to build your graduate community here. Why don't I ask them to get some proposals and let's try to do some experiments. Indeed, I got some real surprises.

One of my quintessential anecdotes about that is when one of the groups proposed a program called Weekly Wednesdays at the Muddy Charles Pub. The proposal was that I buy \$12,000 worth of chicken wings over the course of a year. My reaction to that was they want me to do what? Chicken wings? You gotta be kidding -- you gotta be out of your mind if you think I'm going to buy chicken wings. But the committee, I had a committee comprised of half students and half administrators, came back to me and said we think this might work. It might sound funny but we think it might work and it's worth a try. I said okay, \$12,000 worth of chicken wings, all right.

It has turned out to have been one of the most popular, one of the most enduring programs we could have imagined. Of course, I couldn't have imagined it at first, but Weekly Wednesdays still goes on. It's morphed a little, but it's basically this time when graduate students, intact work groups, whatever, come together on Wednesday nights at the pub. There's free food, there's chicken wings -- and I think it's morphed to other things - but this provides a social medium for students to come together, and it really works. In fact, when I thought about it, it's quite reminiscent of things at Faunce House at Brown.

The student center, when I was there, the pub down there, you could get beer -- chicken wings weren't big then -- but you get beer and a sandwich. It was popular, they were popular nights there where you could get beer, a cheap, cheap beer and a cheap sandwich, and lots of graduate students came together there. So that was one of the examples. There was another one where I said no where someone proposed an MIT dating service called Odds Are Good. But The Goods Are Odd, I'm borrowing a line from Jorge, on that one, Jorge Cham on that one. Odds Are Good -- no, I don't think we're going to do that.

INTERVIEWER: You must have had strong student life at Brown and how that kind of influenced you. You mentioned that you were also politically active, so I wanted to get a sense from you that, I haven't seen either the role of that kind of advocacy involvement with you in graduate school versus the kind of advocacy and political movements that you see now. How has it evolved in its contributions?

COLBERT: Oh, it's certainly different. I don't think we have a -- well, I think we have the national political challenges that ought to have many students out in the streets, but they don't do that now. This generation has some different interests. One of the things that I'm really very pleased to see is the amount of public service that this generation of graduate students is interested in and committed to giving. The public service centers work, Sally Sussman's office has grown dramatically, and in fact, I budgeted out a piece of student life money to make sure that graduate students can be involved in service learning, and in community service at various levels. The amount of work done in the D-lab, in Amy Smith's lab for sustainable development I've been very supportive of and I've slipped a little money down there, too.

These are things that students are interested in that change the world for somebody. The interest in community building across departments is something that students have put some energy in, so I put the Steam Cafe -- a little underground activity of mine to support that and not be terribly visible about it, but make sure it happened has brought urban studies and architecture together in ways that they couldn't have before.

So I think the activism is different. It's not political in the sense that they're struggling against the Bush administration or against the rapidly expanding presidency, or maybe not go there too much. That there isn't the level of protest against this war or these wars that there would have been back in my day, but there was universal -- everybody had to sign up. When we went to a Volunteer Army, that changed the landscape. So, there's not the imminent danger of any particular graduate student becoming cannon fodder in Afghanistan or Iraq to help energize more resistance to our very unpopular and very unwise stance in the world right now.

So there are other things students focus on, things I think in the long run will bring great credit to them and will relieve some suffering in some places. So I applaud them for that. I suppose the old activist in me would still love to see some ramparts put up and some banners unfurled and some student noise around domestic political issues, but that doesn't seem to happen these days.

INTERVIEWER: MIT's been faced with several sort of turning points. You have the research misconduct allegations in the 1990s, the anti-trust student right after that, and the women in science. Do you believe MIT's acted as the world authority? Could it have done more? Did it do the right thing?

COLBERT: I think we could always do more, but I think we've done the right things on these and I've been very pleased about this. Let me go back a little further. In the early '90s, the anti-trust thing, which fathers an anti-trust, I saw it as an attack on a university's right to determine how it will best utilize its limited resources to support students, undergraduates in particular. The background of that was the overlap meetings that used to be held around the Ivy League plus group to make sure that when a student was given an offer for admissions. She got essentially the same kind of offer from all the graduate schools, and could make the decision not on the grounds of money, but on the grounds of which place is best for her to go to, and which place will best offer her an opportunity to develop her intellectual interest and to make a contribution.

The attack on that has led to this subsequent reality in which we have bidding wars now for graduate students, and the students are playing off one school against another for financial resources, and I think it's just unfortunate. I think we took the right stand. We took a principle stand on this back in the early '90s, and said wait a minute, the government's wrong on this and we're going to stand up and fight. It was a pure victory, we won, we won the battle but we lost the war because everyone else caved. But in principle we won and I think that was the best of MIT.

The other turning point for me was the women in science report, and I credit both the dean at the time, Bob Birgeneau, who was dean of science, and Chuck Vest who had the right response to the challenge to not dismiss the women, but to say yeah, the data's solid, we've got a problem, let's see what we can do about it. Scott Krueger affair was a turning point. I think Chuck made the right decision even though it was a painful one. I think the Institute is better off for it to make some changes in how we house our students and the policies around housing.

I think we've corralled, substantially corralled, the issue of alcohol use on campus in a pretty good way. I think we've seen that our students really don't drink as much as people think they do -- not nearly as much, and won't nearly have as many problems, but that we've got resources in place to help students to use alcohol responsibly. And we've made some changes in the housing system that I think have been better, that make the whole enterprise better in my view. Perhaps the one low there was having undergraduates in graduate housing for awhile, that's something that hasn't worked. On the whole I think it's improved.

Now we have a new challenge, and that's coming out of the Jim Shirley matter. The challenge isn't so much around Professor Shirley as it is around the issue of how race impacts faculty, faculty tenured here, faculty sojourn here towards tenure, and how it affects employment at every level of MIT. There is an impact of race here, just as there is outside of MIT, and we have an opportunity to address this in a forthright manner, to address it deeply and with appropriate research and observations around people's experiences and what they imply about the organization. And to do it in a way that can hopefully allow MIT to get out in the forefront of change, as we did with the women.

This challenge is at least as significant as the challenge of women, and perhaps more difficult because it involves deeply held emotions and points of view that have not made it easy for conversations about race to happen, either at this institution or in this society. So I think we have a lot of work to do, but I'm optimistic that if any place can handle this and come up with a set of recommendations and practices that will bring some positive change, it should be MIT.

I guess another challenge that we faced is the challenge of the physical infrastructure of this campus and how it gets renewed and rebuilt and pointed towards the future. It's just an enormous amount of construction on this campus. It just seems that something's being torn up or put up or torn down all the time. We certainly continue this practice of having unique buildings that don't bear any necessary relationship to one another. So it's a challenge to have what appear to be a unified campus -- we don't have a campus that's sort of like the gothic architecture of Yale or the beautiful architecture I found at Brown or the Georgian architecture at Johns Hopkins and stuff like that. We have all these ones.

My personal view of it is that some of them are pretty awful. But they all certainly draw comments. So I think that's a big challenge to renew the plant. There's an enormous challenge with the Bosworth buildings here and the lack of energy efficiency and how to maintain them and still make them cost effective. There's a continuous challenge on student housing here. We're going to have to do more. Doing more is an increasing expense, because construction in a city is just amazingly costly.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a favorite place on campus -- a place you like to retreat to or hide?

COLBERT: Yeah, I'm not sure I want anybody to know. Yes, there are some favorite places on campus.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a favorite hack?

COLBERT: Yeah. Well, I have two favorite hacks -- the two, they're equally wonderful to me. My favorite is probably the police car that was on the dome with the donut, the big donuts on the seat, but equal to that was the Wright Brothers biplane airplane on the dome. I think both were enormous engineering feats, nobody was hurt, nothing was damaged to do them, just a quintessential hack. Now historically, there was a third one that I heard about, wish I had not actually seen, but I'll just talk about it. That was the building cozies that would sabotage a design, to put a cozy over a building. I wish I'd seen that. And I wish I'd seen the one with the Model-T, with the old car hanging off the Green building. Those are wonderful, clever, thoughtful kinds of hacks that really speak to the breadth and depth of engineering expertise around here among our students. I'm not sure I'd want any them deciding they want to come into my house to do something, because no alarm system in the world could keep them out.

INTERVIEWER: I guess I want to get to maybe a little bit, the last couple of minutes here about there's several different trends going on. There seems to be a collection of identity crises. The old, big engineering and science, political sciences have seen some declines, seen the rise of new programs, we got the humanities and social sciences that sometimes are seen to be on the outside of MIT sort of, although they've always had this crisis identity.

COLBERT: Well, I think that's clearly evolution in the sciences and engineering and humanities. By the way, I think the humanities are less outside than they've ever been. Given the number of students who come here with an incredible art, music and related talents. But the evolution seems to be in the direction of intense interdisciplinarity. The questions that are most important today and that are galvanizing the most interest and the most research dollars sit between the fields and require the collective efforts of people from many, many different fields. I think that's really exciting and I think it's natural that as questions evolve, the fields have to evolve with them. And certainly give some to the "old guard" who are more comfortable with their relative silos of activities, which won't go away entirely.

I mean there will always be some interest, for example, in physical chemistry, in chemistry and in some areas of biology that are relatively pure, but the big questions now require a lot more collaboration across those boundaries and that's wonderful. It brings in ideas and energy from sometimes quite unexpected places. So one of the things I'll be looking for in the years to come is that bridge that supposed to be going from the Stata Building to brain sciences, the brain and cognitive science complex, which will be another symbol to me of all of these areas coming together. You have the electrical engineers, and you have the linguists, and you have the brain sciences, the cognitive science, the wet lab brain sciences, the cognitive sciences, the imaging people working on what this massive grey matter up here really does. I think it's really exciting.

I think the developments of biotech industry around us are very exciting and new, and the end in time will be supplanted by something else. We were surrounded by high tech in the '70s and '80s, and now it's biotech, and who knows what it will be 50 years from now. But it'll be exciting, and it really shows to me it's direct evidence of MIT being able to evolve very quickly to take advantage of these trends.

INTERVIEWER: How have changing the sources of funding changed the way that we do the management of government contracts, foundation, corporate, venture capital?

COLBERT: It makes it more challenging, that's for sure. I think this historical relationship between the federal government and universities, I think that's to the detriment of basic research generally speaking, because there are a few other sources of, stable sources of funding to guarantee basic research than in the government. Yes, we certainly have started to fill in the gaps with government with funding from foundations, and certainly good support from corporations, but those are much more limited in scope and limited in terms of what their expectations of outcomes are, than the kind of open checkbook we used to have from the Feds.

We'll survive -- we'll certainly survive and we'll do some wonderful things, but I'm hoping the day will come, once again, when these are over and we turn attention to more and more edifying pursuits that the government will once again see the value of long term support, deep, rich support for public education and for research, and for basic research, because out of those two wells have flown the waters that we're sipping and using down now. I don't see us replenishing those wells particularly.

For me, the real tragedy in this nation will be the continued disinvestment in public education. We just seem to forgotten the lesson of the '50s and the '60s where we turned our attention to educating cadres of scientists and engineers to meet a challenge, and look, we went to the moon. Out of that came all kinds of stuff. All kinds of stuff that put us at the forefront of technology in the world, but we're slipping, we're losing it -- the Chinese are coming on strong. Everybody else is gearing up to take us over. And we're sitting around talking about charter schools and all kinds of foolishness when we really should be, once again, dedicating ourselves to making sure we have an educated populace in all areas, not just science and engineering, but all areas.

INTERVIEWER: I guess we'll start wrapping up here. I want to get some time for you to reflect back a little bit. When I was at your retirement party, I was walking around the audience. The one thing that people mentioned, really, more than anything is that if it wasn't for Ike, so many people wouldn't be here, I wouldn't have stayed or she wouldn't have stayed, or he wouldn't have stayed? What did they see in you, what did you offer?

COLBERT: Well, it's interesting. I think one of the things that I've tried to do is to provide a place where people can come and talk about what's bothering them and try to give them some good advice about how they can deal with their problem. Secondly, being in that chair, it is possible to open some doors by seeding some funding or something, by having a conversation with a department about a student's promise, by creating programs that give people opportunity to show that they can compete effectively in a place like MIT, and by using my bully pulpit outside of the institution to demystify some of what MIT is. So that a broad range of people with talents, ideas, vision and energy can come here and contribute to the development of knowledge, and do so at a level that they might not even have been aware that they were able to.

I've always had faith in the ability of people to rise to a challenge when they're supported and feel that there's someone there to mentor, to support, sometimes just to be a good listener, and to help them to see what it is they need to do. If people see that as opening doors, yeah, I've been happy to do that. I didn't get to where I am by myself. I still don't have the shoulders, some pushed me through doors, some dragged me through windows, others encouraged me, and others got out of the way so that I could make some contributions. I think I can do no less for others while I'm in that chair.

That's sort of been a mission in life. I didn't get where I am by myself and it's my responsibility to help others to do get where they need to go. It doesn't matter who they are -- it doesn't matter whether it's a person of color, whether it's a white student, whether it's an international student, woman, whatever, if I'm in a position to try to help somebody in some way, it's my obligation to do it.

The other thing that's been my obligation to do is to bring people to the table. Now I say this in a somewhat humorous way, but underneath it is there's a real conviction here that we're always telling graduate students about how brilliant they are and how accomplished the people are who come here. And now we have an institution that has all kinds of issues and problems in the administration. So all right, I think you're so bright, I'm going to put you at the table and put you to work, let's see what you come up with. In fact, by bringing students to the table in a meaningful way, we've just had some wonderful solutions and some great thinking and some wonderful leg work done on a host of problems that I think would have been much more difficult to resolve without having more minds, more good minds, at the table. To me it ain't rocket science -- many good minds are better than one, usually.

INTERVIEWER: Look at your time as dean of graduate students or your involvement with the associate dean or senior associate. Can you think of alternatively very tough decisions you had to make or events or decisions that weren't particularly affirming?

COLBERT: Yeah, I've had to make some tough decisions about who stays and who goes. Had to make some tough decisions around students who had some problems that they just couldn't cope with. It's always tough because people come here to get their degrees and then be able to go off and contribute to society and sometimes it simply doesn't work, and sometimes it's out of the student's control. That's been tough.

Yeah, one of the particularly affirming things that I'm very happy about is having been in the chair to put into place was a new policy around childbearing for women graduate students. This started actually with one of our married students in Eastgate who came with some thoughts about how we might change the rules to make childbearing more affirming to our graduate women than it was. It used to be treated as an adverse medical condition. The way we set up the rules, if have you have one, you get cut off. Literally, you get cut off. So you're having a baby, hey, you gotta get out, you can't live in institutional housing, and by the way, you're losing your RA and you can't get any money through MIT now. That's not terribly affirming.

So, MIT, with our efforts was the first university in the country to develop and implement an institute-wide policy that we call childbirth accommodation policy that permits a woman graduate student to have her child, and bond with the child, and not be adversely impacted in her graduate career. I'm very proud of that because it was the right signal to give to a growing group, a growing cadre of graduate students who are coming to the institution -- the number of women is growing here. So that was particularly affirming, I'm very pleased about that, and pleased that we were first out with a policy that was institute-wide.

Others around the country now are doing their own versions of that. Some going further than we have, some including the men, others doing longer periods, some deeper and richer financial support, but nonetheless following the example. So I'm real pleased about that.

INTERVIEWER: If you saw yourself 10, 25 more years ago, based on your experience since then and seeing what's coming down the road, what advice would you give?

COLBERT: Run in the other direction. I never in my wildest dreams ever imagined that I would be a dean -- ever imagined that I could be or wanted to be. In fact, I gave the dean such a hard time in graduate school that this is perhaps a turnaround. I never imagined this. What it says to me is that one has to be open to possibilities in life. You have to be a fast learner, be willing to take calculated risks, be open to many possibilities and be able to see quickly whether, in fact, you might be able to make a contribution there and be willing to try it, and you have to be a bridge builder. Because none of what I've been credited with was done alone. I mean there are just scores of people who were on the bus. The issue is who can you get on the bus, because it is who's on the bus that counts. It's collaboration that really speaks to me.

So it has been an amazing journey for me here with twists and turns along the way, none of which I could have anticipated, but each one of which offered some possibility to learn something entirely new, to stretch my capabilities in some other direction, to contribute something that I thought might be important to the institution and to make a difference, to make a difference.

INTERVIEWER: What do you want future generations to remember about you or the office or your time here, or maybe what are popular accounts or kind of current mythology or incorrect. Correct me for the record.

[LAUGHTER]

COLBERT: Correctly, it ain't for the-- I'm not sure what they're all thinking out there. No, I think they gonna pretty much get it right that I brought graduate students to the table in a meaningful way around decisions and issues that affect their experience here, that I changed the direction of the institution around the issue of graduate students and community. That I helped create and maintain an office that's very student-friendly. That I built collaborations across a wide variety of administrative functions here that didn't necessarily see themselves as having a role in graduate education or graduate life, and it was all to the purpose of making the graduate experience here a really good one for the majority of our students. That's what I want people to remember. Most of the graduate students haven't eaten at my table so they don't know I can cook.

INTERVIEWER: What are you going to be doing next?

COLBERT: Well, I'm going to take some time to try to change my pace for awhile. I want to reflect a little bit more on the past 30 years here. But I'm also involved in two start-ups now and three more along the way.

I have picked up along the way at MIT this work ethic that's unrelenting, and I know that I won't be able to sit still for very long. I have wanted to try my hand in entrepreneurial matters just to see what happens and see what kind of fun I can have there. So I will be doing a number of entrepreneurial activities, some of which are not for profit and some of which are for profit. But I will be having some fun with people I really like and we'll see what the next 30 years bring me.

INTERVIEWER: Do you and your partner have any plans about where you want to travel or what you want to do--?

COLBERT: We always do. I learned a long time ago -- this is something that the passing of a number of really close friends early on changed for me. The three people -- two of them I've mentioned earlier in this interview, Constantine Semonides and Jim Culliton, both of whom died early, so there was some concern. Then Vera Ballard, who used to work over in HST -- very good friend. She was an undergraduate at Brown when I was a graduate student there. Those people, they all died young and reinforced for me that tomorrow is never guaranteed.

So all of that vacation time that I never took, all of those excuses that I had for not taking much of my time, all that stopped. Jim was the last person to pass away 11 years ago, and it was then that I decided I need to make sure that I do some of the things, that Tom and I see some of the world that we've wanted to see while we can do it. So every year there's a major trip somewhere, at least one major trip somewhere. So I've been pretty much around the world because of that, and that will continue. It's turned out to be the right thing to do because in some of these places you can't be 70 years old climbing up and down steep pathways, et cetera. There are places that it's good to be alive to go to, and that will continue. That definitely will continue.

The cooking will continue, because I find that just very relaxing and affirming, and besides which I can beat the hell out of a piece of steak and it doesn't talk back. That will continue. The collecting of art will continue, because that's a lifelong, to me deeply intellectual pursuit to have a piece of artwork that speaks to me and that I can enjoy every day and add to a collection at home that I can look at and say each one of these has a story for me, and each one has a story for us and is somehow connected to our lives in a meaningful way. That will continue.

But the other piece of it will be some challenge that gets me up every day, that keeps me learning something new on a regular basis and it keeps basically keeps me young. I've learned here, particularly at MIT, over 30 years that lifelong learning is important, and that having a challenge before you to grow in some way, to learn something entirely new, to push boundaries is absolutely important to being willing to get up in the morning and go forward with life. So these are the things that will occupy the next 30 years.

INTERVIEWER: How did you and Tom meet -- a shared interest, a shared passion?

COLBERT: How did we meet? No, we met in a bar. It was shared drinking, that's what it was. No, we just had a very funny meeting in a most unusual place, actually. I'd actually gone out just to watch people dancing and I met the love of my life that night. I wasn't interested in meeting anybody -- sometimes things happen many times when you least expect them. I wasn't interested in meeting anyone, and I was just bored and I like to watch people dance. So I just met this guy and we hit it off. In many ways we're so very different -- he's younger than me, and I used to not like people younger than me. He's a similar A-type personality and I usually didn't gravitate to A-type personalities.

But we found that we had many similar likes -- we both like art, we both love to travel, we both have a similar sense of humor, we both like to cook -- he's as good a cook as I am, so it makes for a lot of fun. We both love a beautiful garden, beautiful places. We just found that we were compatible in ways that I didn't expect from somebody younger than me. It's worked -- we've been together 27 years now. More than 27, getting into the future together. We'll be together the rest of our lives, and I'm very happy about that, too. Our families are happy for us, which is very nice. It doesn't always happen either. And we've got some really good friends. Friends from MIT, friends from out of here, friends all over the world -- that's another good reason to travel too. So we're fortunate in that regard. So many aspects of our lives have come together in such a positive way, and that's great. That's great.

INTERVIEWER: Final two questions. MIT's 150th is an occasion is most to look backwards as it is to look forwards. So maybe the half of looking back at it, what about MIT is different, why haven't other universities been able to imitate MIT's success?

COLBERT: Well, that's a very good question. I think it has much to do with the people who have been through, remarkable people who are been through and who have given real substance to this place, has much to do with the style of MIT which has encouraged innovation -- a level of entrepreneurship that's unlike any other place I've ever seen. A celebration and recognition of effectiveness and competence that's not matched many places, in many other places. And a spirit of collaboration that just makes this place kind of unique. Of course, there's some sheer genius here too.

Me, I'm not in that camp, but I met some of the most incredibly brilliant people I've ever met in my life here. One of them having been Jerry Wiesner, as a matter of fact. And some of our Nobel laureates just brilliant people who managed to draw others around them and into enterprises that build upon their collective strengths.

Yeah, it's hard to say what makes MIT MIT, but it fundamentally has to be the people, not the buildings, it's not the research infrastructure, it's who's here.

INTERVIEWER: So what's MIT's trajectory as far as where it's headed? Would you change where it's headed?

COLBERT: I don't think we can. It's headed where it's headed. Oh, I think we're going to make some incredible inroads into the central nervous system. I think we're going to have some amazing impact on medicine, to the genome, the genomic work and unraveling what all that stuff really does. We found out the junk genes really do mean something, and we're going to figure out how they regulate everything else. I think MIT will go a long ways and that'll have a tremendous impact on health sciences and on biological -- on life, on the quality of life for every human being on this planet. I think that's going to happen.

I think we will continue do some marvelous, incredible things in the arts. Something that MIT still isn't as well known for, even though the arts pervade, the institution is so fundamental to what everybody else does here that it's part of the backdrop, and most people outside don't understand that. But I think we do some wonderful things in the arts here. We'll continue to bring art, engineering and science together in unique ways to create some new forms. I think that would be great value for the future. I would like to see MIT become a much more truly diverse place. I think we have some challenges in that regard, particularly with respect to the faculty and the administrative staff here.

I think it can happen, but much of that will depend on the quality of the discussion that's to follow this investigation of race and ethnicity on this campus. If we achieve all those things, if we really make some headway on them, MIT will continue to be one of the world's greatest institutions, a place that sets the standard that others aspire to. I really do think the institution can do it. I've seen MIT, and been part of MIT doing some things that I would never have expected, including my appointment as dean. I would never have had reason to expect it.

It's the willingness of the institution to take these bold moves and take these bold positions and think out of the box, as we say so often around here, an act out of the box that will keep us ahead. I look forward to looking back. I've just been grateful to have been a part of this amazing institution and have contributed to the enterprise in some small ways. It's been wonderful for me, and I hope it says to other folks out there like me that it's possible.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have anything you want to add before we finish up?

COLBERT: I've got 1,000 stories. I'm not sure I want to put them on record. I think I'll let others tell some of the stories.

INTERVIEWER: Well, we're gonna go now, it's just after noon.

COLBERT: Oh, my gosh, is it really? Wow!