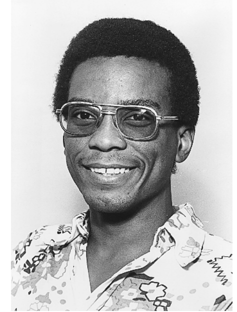
## ISAAC M. COLBERT



BA 1968 (experimental psychology) Johns Hopkins University, MA 1971 and PhD 1974 (experimental psychology) Brown University; assistant professor of psychology, Northeastern University, 1972-1976; joined the MIT staff in 1977 as senior consultant/trainer, Office of Personnel Development; assistant equal opportunity officer, 1979-1981; manager of faculty and staff information services, 1981-1985; project manager, strategic plan for administrative computing, 1985-1986; assistant to the vice president for financial operations, 1986-1988; associate dean of the Graduate School, 1988-1996; senior associate dean for graduate education, 1996-1999; dean for graduate students, effective July 1, 1999.

I grew up in Baltimore in a small family. There were just four of us in the direct family, although some extended relations lived with us for a long time. My father, James Colbert, Sr., grew up in Baltimore and my mother, Rosa Lee Colbert, was born in Pensacola, Florida. All of her side of the family was from Florida, Louisiana, and Alabama. They moved up to Maryland in the 1920s primarily as a result of Ku Klux Klan activities in Pensacola. In fact, my grandfather on my mother's side owned property that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. Clearly, some white folks wanted that property and basically ran them off. He died as a result of injuries in some kind of altercation that the family—my mother's side of the family—just doesn't want to remember or talk about. I was always left to imagine that it was Ku Klux Klan-related activities. My mother's oldest living sister at the time, Thelma, used to hint about that, as she was old enough to remember it. They moved up to Maryland when my mother was five years old, and stayed there.

My father was caught up in World War II like most young people at that time at that age. He clearly experienced a lot of racism. He rose and fell in the ranks. He'd make a few promotions—I believe he got as high as a sergeant—got into some fights with whites who didn't want to see that, and was demoted several times. At the end of the war, when most of the soldiers where being pulled out of Europe, he and a group of buddies were severely injured in a land mine incident in Belgium. They ran over a land mine. All of his buddies were killed and Dad sustained serious injuries, including brain injuries, from that. He effectively spent the rest of his life in and out of, mostly in, hospitals—Public Health Service hospitals and related hospitals.

One of my early memories is my mother every week dragging us to various places to see my dad. For the longest time, he was at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC. I remember one early incident which told me in no uncertain terms about my mother's own strength and focus. The doctors at Walter Reed decided, without consulting her, to move him to a hospital down in North Carolina. They didn't consult her at all. I clearly remember my mother going down, taking us down to see Dad—he wasn't there—and being informed that they had made the decision to move him and basically telling her that she had no recourse. I have a clear image of Mom pulling us into an office in Washington and people clearly

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not wanting to see this black woman in the office, and Mom banging desks and making a big fuss saying that she was not about to leave until somebody answered some questions about her husband. She made such a ruckus and was so convincing about it that they finally decided to see her. These were VA officials. They wanted my brother and me to stay outside while they talked with Mom, and she said she wasn't going to go anywhere without her kids—and that anywhere she went and anything they had to say, they could say in front of the kids, because he's their father. The upshot of it was that Mom got Dad moved to Perryville in northern Maryland, and we used to go up and see him every week. Sometimes he'd know us, sometimes he wouldn't. His illness progressed over a fourteen-year period. My father passed away when I was twelve.

That's one of the things I remember, but it always focused on my mother's love and her strength and her willingness to take on anybody when it dealt with issues associated with her family. The other thing I happen to remember was something that really showed a black woman's strength at the time, well before women's rights and women's liberation and all these issues became so popular among the general population. My father's side of the family was a real patriarchy. Grandpa on my father's side ruled the family with an iron fist. Everybody used to jump at his command, except my mother. He was very, very bad. He was a real nasty old guy. He used to want to open and read everybody's mail and all kinds of stuff like that, and rule the family. Of course, with Dad in the hospital, he sort of felt that Mom should kowtow to him, and I remember my mother standing up to him and basically saying that nobody reads her mail, nobody tells her what to do—"I didn't marry you, I married your son," and that kind of stuff. She really kept that side of the family at bay for the longest time. That I remember.

So the idea of strength and focus really did come from my mother, and it was just characteristic of her all the way through. She always was a fighter and had very clear objectives. It was very difficult because she was a single parent. She had to struggle to make sure that my brother and I stayed in school and stayed focused. She had to make a home and a living for us. During very difficult times, some of her older sisters moved in with us. So she had responsibility for a pretty large family, and she made sure everybody was whole. It was not easy for her. Mom's got a very, very strong personality, very feisty. She knows what she wants and she usually gets it. She is willing to work for it and fight for it. So that was always an early lesson in focus and strength.

*What about your high school?*

Until I got to high school, I was in all-black schools. My elementary school initially was somewhat across town, a little bit of a walk. That's where the school system assigned me originally, but Mom intervened so that I could go to the school right up the street, #137. I remember that battle. Mom went down to the school board and said that it didn't make sense for me to be going across town when there was a perfectly adequate school right up the street, so I was transferred after my first year in school to #137 right up the street on Francis Street in northwest Baltimore.

Then I went from there to junior high school, I still remember that—#187, Charles Hamilton Houston Junior High School. I remembered it because probably the teachers in junior high school were some of my earliest, most influential, intellectual models. My homeroom teacher, Mr. Moore, for three grades—seven, eight, and nine—was my French and Latin teacher. He had a Ph.D. He was one of the most brilliant human beings I had ever met. I never knew anybody black before who had achieved anything like that. I had never heard of a doctorate until I met Mr. Moore. I had never come across a black person who spoke anything but English, and Moore spoke five languages. He spoke fluent French, fluent Latin, fluent Greek, fluent German, and fluent Portuguese. I remember he and Mr. Carter, one of the other black teachers in school—they were all black—would converse in languages when they were saying anything they didn't want us to know. They would start talking in Latin or Greek or French or something, and it was always amazing to me. It would just close out everybody.

It was clear to us that these were very unusual people. Our English teachers had master's degrees. Of course, it took me some time to realize that they were teaching in junior high because they couldn't get jobs anywhere else. Being black, they just were not allowed in other places back at that time. But together, they made every effort to stim-

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ulate us. I was always sort of right up front and center on anything having to do with academics or trouble at that time. I always had a big mouth, so often I had to stay after school and I used those as opportunities to really talk with people more. I got a lot of their life stories out. They spent a lot of time telling me about the value of education and pointing me to advanced degrees.

*You mean in the junior high school?*
In the junior high school. It was at that time that I decided, one, I was going to get a Ph.D., and two, I was going to have it by the time I was twenty-five.

*Because of people like Dr. Moore?*
Because of people like Mr. Moore. We always called him Mr. Moore.

*I heard that, I noticed.*
Actually we called him "Plus," but that was French for more. We called him Plus behind his back. He had big lips, but that was another issue. But it was directly because of people like Mr. Moore and Mr. Carter and other teachers on the junior high level that I decided that I was going to do that. I was going to stay in education, I was going to get the most advanced degree I could get, which at the time was a Ph.D., and I was going to have it by my twenty-fifth birthday.

*When you were in high school, particularly moving toward your junior and senior year, what kinds of things did you cherish most in terms of your school?*
Well, high school was very different from everything else. I went to a predominantly Jewish high school. It was an exam school, Baltimore City College. In fact, my folks live right behind it now. There were only six black students in my high school class, my homeroom class. We were in a special college preparatory class. We were obviously, in the beginning, objects of some attention to our Jewish friends. My homeroom teacher at the time and I didn't like each other one bit, and we had three years of battles where he took every opportunity to try to cut this arrogant little black boy down to size and I was not about to be cut down to size.

So in some respects, my high school was a real education in negative experiences and how to deal with them and how to overcome them. In fact, I did. I ended up being president of everything and chairman of everything, vice president of the graduating class, president and treasurer of the school's political organization, and president of just about every club you can name in the school. I did everything but athletics in high school, and I consciously stayed away from athletics because that's what was expected. So I went into student government, newspaper, everything, and I just excelled at everything.

Probably what helped keep me on a social keel was a strong and supportive network in the community, something that's gone now. Everybody talks about it, and it really is gone. There were a lot of people who were outside of my family, but in the neighborhood, who really applauded me and moved me on and got me into even other things. They even got me into politics at that point. Just before I got out of high school at eighteen, I organized and was chairman of our local civic improvement association on the block, fighting a local transit company over an issue of siting their bus yards in a dangerous location where the kids played. I got a lot of attention and publicity for that and learned some other things out of that, too. Probably the chief lesson I learned was how people from very, very different walks of life and very different levels of education can nonetheless be supportive and helpful.

Some people stand out in my mind. Three doors up the street were Mr. and Mrs. Blanks. Mr. Blanks was a custodian in school—not very much education, but a first-rate gentleman and human being and always very supportive. He would stop me when he would see me and ask me, "Well, Isaac, what are you doing in school? Tell me about your schoolwork. Tell me about your plans. Have you changed your life plans? You need to think about these issues." Mrs. Blanks was a schoolteacher. Her family had come from the very bigoted eastern shore of Maryland. She told me a lot of things about dealing with white people, lessons I've never forgotten. It stood out so much because no one had ever said those things to me before. Mrs. Blanks was a real fountain of knowledge in just how to deal with people. I've never forgotten her. Then there were other people around, the extended community who sort of made sure that I didn't stray too far from academics and didn't stray too far from the straight and narrow as I was wont to do, like most of the kids around there.

So those were some of the things. Of course, my mother always made sure that we had a very

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clear, unambiguous structure to deal with. Mom had to work. She worked in the post office. So when we came home, there was generally nobody home and we had things to do. When Mom got home, we had better have our homework done and show it to her. It took me years before I realized she didn't know what she was looking at.

*But you would never know it, right?*

I would never know it. She wanted to see the homework done. There were chores that we had to do—cleaning up or we had to keep our rooms clean and if the place needed dusting, mopping, we took care of that. After dinner, we took care of the dishes. My brother and I would take turns washing and drying the dishes, or hauling ashes from the fireplace downstairs, or doing something—our responsibility for maintaining the home. It kept us from the streets too, incidentally, because we had plenty to do. But I do remember there was a very clear set of expectations about what we were going to do, and mom enforced them in no uncertain terms.

*Who helped you to decide what college you could go to?*

In a strange way that was my high school advisor—academic advisor and my homeroom teacher—who was trying his best to get me not to apply to Johns Hopkins University. There were two choices at the time, three choices really. Morgan State was where most of the black kids were going. It wasn't a university then, it was Morgan State College. Then there was the military, or Johns Hopkins University. Johns Hopkins was such a big player in the area. I didn't know anybody who went there and my homeroom teacher was so adamant that I wouldn't be able to compete, I decided that's where I was going to go—that's absolutely where I was going to go.

*Why would that person tell you that? That's exactly what you would do then.*

Exactly. And in a strange way I think he was doing that on purpose. I think if he had told me I should apply to Johns Hopkins, it probably would have been the last thing I would have done. But I didn't want to go to Morgan because I felt there was something more out there. All black students were going to Morgan and it seemed like following the lemmings. I thought, "Well, there are other universities out there," and I wasn't interested in moving far away from home. I was admitted to Kalamazoo College in Michigan. They just admitted me and offered me a full scholarship. I was thinking at that time I was going to be a chemist. Boy, they jumped right on it. But I didn't know anything about Kalamazoo.

I decided I was going to go to Johns Hopkins. What really sealed it for me was my interview with the admissions officer. Now bear in mind, I had really done well at one of the city's premier high schools. There were two premier high schools—well, four, actually. There was Homer Polytechnic, which was for kids who were interested particularly in engineering; there was City College, the other lead school for kids who mostly ended up being doctors and college professors and stuff like that; then there was Eastern and Western, which were the equivalents for girls. City and Poly were all-boys schools, Eastern and Western were all-girls schools. City and Eastern were across the street from each other, and Poly and Western were near each other.

So in any case, when I interviewed with the admissions officer, he stated a line that as long as I live I will never forget—"I am not sure that Johns Hopkins is prepared to accommodate Negro students." Now, why did he say that to me? Look at my record. I was president of everything, involved in everything, excellent academic record in spite of everything everybody tried to do in high school to keep me from excelling—all the unfairness, everything. And then he is going to sit there and tell me that he wasn't sure Hopkins was prepared to accommodate me.

This was 1963, before we were terribly popular. There were all kinds of things going on in the South and there were civil rights issues in town—in Baltimore, in particular. Some progress had been made, but not in every place. There were still places of resistance, and Johns Hopkins was one of those places at the time. I remember telling him, "You're going to accommodate one, you're going to accommodate me." In looking down at my record, he suddenly leaped on the fact that we had the same birthdate, December 7th. Suddenly the whole interview changed, it changed character. The whole thing just changed. We were saying, "Oh, Pearl Harbor Day!" I started talking to him in a more pleasant way and then the next thing I knew, he was not only going to admit me to Hopkins but give me a full scholarship.

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So I went to Johns Hopkins in 1964, September of '64, and in my entering class there was a grand total of four of us—four out of about a thousand students.

*About like here.*
About like here. Four—count us—four. Three of us were from Baltimore. Of the three, two of us were from the same high school. And there was one kid from Grambling, Louisiana. He elected to live in the dorms. The rest of us decided that we were going to commute. All three of us made it through. The kid from Grambling lasted his first year and then he just couldn't take it anymore. He caught hell in the dorms, he just caught hell in the dorms. It was just horrible for him and he ended up leaving. But I know what helped me to get through at least the first two and a half years of Hopkins was living at home and being able to get away and come back into my own supportive community.

After that period, society had changed a little bit, I knew Hopkins better, I had moved away from the hard sciences and had stumbled into experimental psychology. By that time, the faculty in the department discovered me and then wrapped themselves around me. Particularly that last year at Hopkins was actually a lot of fun in the psychology department. I was sort of a darling and mascot of the department. Then they started taking me under their wings. It was all-white professors, senior and junior faculty, who basically took me under their wings and just kind of adopted me. I was one of the few undergraduates allowed in the faculty club, a very exclusive stuffy place, a real experience in dealing with the privileged.

*You're saying that's primarily because you were in that experimental psychology division?*
And I was good. I was. The reason I got in there is that I had taken a psychology class, one of my psychology classes, and a faculty member was talking about research with rats. He had a research project with studying the way rats lick and the rate at which they lick; their tongues move actually at an amazing speed. He was developing a device that he called a lickometer to measure the speed. He was describing his device and I remember thinking, "Oh, I have a better idea on that. I think I can improve on that."

So I walked into his office later and said, "You know, your lecture on the lickometer. I've got some thoughts about how you might improve this device, because I think if you do x, y, z, it might work better." He looked at it and I remember going up to his blackboard. I never thought about just walking into a faculty member's office and grabbing the chalk and going to his blackboard, without so much as a by-your-leave. I just went over and did it. He looked at the stuff on the blackboard and looked at me and said, "Do you want to work for me?" And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, I need somebody to help out with the research. Are you interested?" I said, "Yes, I'm interested," and so I got involved in my first piece of research there.

*That's fabulous.*
I did really well, did really well.

*What year were you then?*
This was just as I entered that department, so it would have been '66. I was a sophomore and, like all sophomores, a brash know-it-all. But I knew something at that point. What that project sort of opened up in me was a piece that I really never quite saw before.

My brother is a tinkerer. My brother has no problem taking apart these little model trains with thousands of pieces and sort of putting them back together again. I used to work with him on that, but I was never excited about it. But what this project awakened in me was sort of a love of the toys of the field. And I was very good at it. I could get down with this equipment and, not knowing very much about it, all of a sudden see how the thing works and go in and see some improvements and play with it and get stuff working that nobody else could get working. The graduate students thought I was great. I never really thought much about it at the time, except that I was having fun. I was really having fun. And it was these faculty members who were one of the key elements in my going to graduate school. The other came out of a summer job.

*You're talking a little bit about two things. One is, how you got into your particular field, which includes your graduate work as well, and the other is some of the mentors whom you actually encountered. Could you say a little bit more about those two aspects?*
I suppose the mentors I found have, one way or another, come out of my demonstrating what I could do and how I could be helpful to them in

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their agendas. Of course, they were picking me up and saying, "Okay, this kid can be helpful and here's what we can do for him." Of course, seeing it in hindsight is perfect; I couldn't see this happening. Outside of people in the community like Mr. and Mrs. Blanks, people in the community who provided good direction, academically and intellectually probably the most significant early person other than Mr. Moore—someone who really grabbed hold of me and acted in a classical mentoring arrangement—was a guy who ran the lab at Edgewood Arsenal, where I was mistakenly sent.

I'll try to be brief about this, but at that time the government had summer jobs. You could take a civil service exam and, if you scored well, they had jobs up to the level of GS-4 during the summer. You took the job, you stated your interest. At that point I was just about to switch my major from biology to experimental psychology, and I hadn't yet. But they made a mistake and sent me to Edgewood Arsenal Medical Research Labs, Experimental Medicine Division, Psychology Branch. Edgewood Arsenal at that time was a chemical warfare center, part of the Army's chemical warfare program. I was sent out to the lab in the summer of 1966 and there I met this guy, Bill Wagman, who ran this lab. They didn't quite know what to do with me at first. They talked and we talked. They talked about what they could do with me and they decided to see what I could do with a piece of digital logic equipment—primitive kind of stuff, digibits, that you go in the back and you hook up pins and put them together in a receiver and you design a circuit. You hook them up in sequence and if you do it right, it does something.

Well, I just grabbed that and ran with it. I thought this was fascinating stuff. One of his technicians, a fellow named George Maxie, gave me about a one-day seminar on all the various pieces and what they do, showed me something he had put together. I said, "Oh, I can do that," and I sat down and a week later I had designed a piece of equipment that would test some rats. I went back and hooked the thing up and it worked. All this time Bill Wagman was watching me and talking to George on the side. Finally, he came to me and said, "Let's go talk. I think you've got some real talent. If you're willing to work with me this summer in this lab, I think something good can come out of this. Have you ever done a piece of research?" I told him what I had done at Hopkins. He gave me an experiment to do on my own with this equipment I had put together. The long and short of it is that at the end of the summer, I wrote up my first piece of research and I received an award from Edgewood Arsenal. I got a five-hundred-dollar award and an offer to come back the next summer outside of that program that took me there.

The next summer I was allowed to come back at grade GS-5 and do more experiments. By the end of the summer, the director of the lab—George Crampton, who was the number two man in the Army's experimental medicine branch—had found out about me. Bill had talked to him about me and had sort of marched me in to talk to this very austere man. I'll never forget that meeting with George, the first time I ever met him. Here was this very austere white man with this crew cut and a big .45 hanging on the side. In the lab he was wearing a .45 on his side, and looking and acting very conservative, really gruff at first. I remember by the time we got through that interview, he and I were both laughing and talking. I remember saying something about the .45 and he pulls it out, "Here, take it." In any case, we all got to be really good friends, and it was George who kept me from getting drafted in 1968.

*Because of that research you were involved in.*

Because of the research I was involved in, because he knew me. I was the first black person he ever really got to know. We used to talk about that sort of stuff a little bit—more than a little bit, actually. He had some very conservative views and misapprehensions about what black people were like. When I think about it, it was awful. I had a lot of gall. I was just a kid, you know. But I wasn't afraid of him. I was about eighteen at that time.

*Like, a sophomore or a junior?*

Yes—about nineteen or twenty. I was just a kid at that time. But I wasn't afraid of him—you know, big deal. He and Bill would come and pick me up. When I worked during the summer, they would drive by the house and pick me up and we would drive in to the lab together, mostly arguing about the ethics and the morality of the work we were doing in testing poisons and stuff. They were really testing my positions on things. They were good at arguing. We used to argue all the time, all the time, and if I had a lapse in logic or a lapse in my argument, they were right on my butt.

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*So you had to really learn how to defend yourself, right?*
That's right. I had to learn, too, how to defend myself and how not to take certain kinds of comments and statements too personally—when they would say, "Well, you damn fool, that's one of the stupidest things I ever heard," not to get rattled by something like that. I didn't know it at the time, but I realized it by the time I got to graduate school that that was something very important.

In any case, they would do that. Just one little incident I remember when the riots happened in Baltimore in '68. I was still working in the summer of '68.

*That's a very important time.*
I remember George commandeering a couple of soldiers and a jeep with a .50-caliber machine gun on it, and he stuck me in the back of this jeep. Baltimore was closed. Edgewood is twenty miles north of Baltimore. Baltimore was closed during the riots and George was going to get me home. He had called my mama and my mama said, "You get my boy home." So there were George and these two guys and a jeep with a .50-caliber machine gun, which I had never seen before in my life, and George bulled his way through everything and got me home that night and delivered me to Mama. Mama hadn't met him before, but she got the biggest kick out of him. She thought he was a real hot ticket.

It was George and Bill who really cemented the deal on my going to graduate school. They were the ones who said to me where I should go, and paved the way to Brown.

*What do you mean, they paved the way?*
They knew most of the faculty at Brown in the psychology department. I remember Bill telling me one day, "You know, we're going to send you to Brown." I was so provincial I had never heard of Brown. I remember saying to Bill, "What's that, one of those little black colleges out in the woods somewhere?" And he said, "You're kidding, aren't you?" I said, "No." He said, "Brown University is an Ivy League university in Providence, Rhode Island." And I said, "What?"

He told me about the experimental psychology operation there. It was number two in the country at the time. Number one was out west somewhere. Bill and George knew all the faculty there and they wrote letters of recommendation. I didn't find out until I got to Brown, my first day in graduate school, that they never said anything about my race—never said a word about my race.

*Isn't that interesting?*
It was clear to me on that first day when I met my advisor, day one, the minute we locked eyes it was clear to me that he had no idea until he met me that I was black. That started another chapter in my life. This is now 1968. I'm in Providence, Rhode Island, deposited in Providence, Rhode Island in what seemed to me like an Alice in Wonderland situation. I arrived at Brown University and I had never seen so many Porsches and Maseratis and Mercedes and things in my life. I had never seen anything like that before, and these kids running around in their yellow sweaters and their blue sweaters and their pink sweaters, you know. It was very clear that I was in a very privileged and wealthy environment, and that this was going to be an experience that was going to be very interesting and enlightening.

Then I found my way to the psychology department. Over the summer, I had corresponded with a fellow named Alan Schrier, who was a really big-time primate psychologist, primate behaviorist. One of the big primatologists was his mentor and he was this guy's top student. So anyway, I thought I wanted to be in primate learning and development, which sounded very interesting.

I'll never forget when I met Alan for the first time. I walked into his office at the Hunter Lab. Alan was standing there looking out the window with his hands behind his back. He didn't know anybody was in the room at the time, he was just staring out of the window in reverie. I remember going, "Ahem." He turned around and looked at me, and the expression on his face just froze me for an instant. Then his eyebrow went up and he said, "May I help you?" in that kind of challenging tone. What was really being said was, "Who the hell are you, black kid?" I said, "Are you Professor Schrier?" He said, "Yes I am, may I help you?" And I said, "Well, I'm Isaac—Isaac Colbert." And he couldn't help himself. Instantly, his eyebrows shot up again and he said, "You're … *you're* Isaac Colbert?" And it all just sort of came to me in a flash. He didn't know that I'm black. I must have reacted to that because then he caught himself and said something like, "Oh I … I … I didn't … I didn't know." I said, "You didn't know I was black, did you? Nobody told you?" And he said, "Well, it doesn't really matter, it doesn't really matter."

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By that time I started to steam. I was mad at Bill, I was mad at George, I was mad at people at Hopkins, that none of them had told these folks that they were sending a black kid up there. It just all came to me in a flash and I started to get angry about it. And then proceeded three years of fun and war in the psychology department.

*Now, he was your advisor?*
He was my advisor for my master's thesis. Alan was a most unusual man, emotionally about six years old. He ran his lab by terror. His graduate students were just terrorized by him and that was the way he kept control. Then he had me. And not only was I not afraid of Alan, but I really thought he was racist. I challenged him, I argued and fought with him. We had, at one point, screaming fights in the hallway. I was not afraid of Alan. When I didn't like what he was doing or thought he was wrong about something, I wasn't afraid to say it.

*You sound like your mother.*
Yes, and in fact Mom would counsel me, "Well, you stick to your guns. If he's not telling you something right, then you stick to your guns about it. The degree isn't worth all that." I'm not so sure I believe that now, but I was putting it all on the line—and particularly when I got there and realized within the first few days that I was the second black student that department had ever had, the second black graduate student. The first was a woman named Mae Simmons, who graduated with a doctorate in 1954 and died of cancer the next year. And then there was me.

*So you were actually the first black male.*
Absolutely, the first black male graduate student in the psychology department at Brown, the first. This all turned out well in the end, but that first week was really hell—the introduction to Alan Schrier, my master's advisor, and then the introduction to the department head, Jake Kling.

I think Jake thought he was being very helpful and supportive to me. Well, he was giving me this little personal tour of the lab. They were all bending over backwards for the black kid, you know. Jake was taking me on a personal tour of the lab and I remember him walking me to the main entrance of the lab. There is this grand staircase going down, and overlooking the staircase is this picture of this old angry-looking white man. He stopped me and told me that this was a picture of Walter S. Hunter—a great psychologist, by the way, one of the great psychologists of the twentieth century—and the founder of the Hunter Lab. He put his arm around my shoulder and said, "You know, Isaac, Walter was no great lover of your people and he is probably turning over in his grave at your presence in this department today." And I'm thinking to myself, "Why is he telling me this?" And big mouth me, what do I turn to Jake and say? "Well, thank you for telling me that because I'm going to make sure I walk by the old bastard's picture every day." I said just that. It slipped out. Jake really was shocked by that comment. He didn't have anything else to say and walked away.

I think they all wondered, "What the hell did they admit to this department?" That first week I was really getting angry. People were reacting to me like they had never seen anybody black before. They certainly weren't all that sure that they were pleased to have me there. One of the new graduate students in my cohort of ten in the department was a kid from the University of Florida, and the only interaction he had ever had with anybody black was his maid and his servants in the house. So that first week was a very difficult week.

Then, as things progressed and I got to meet more of the faculty and meet other students, they began to calm down, and particularly when we entered the pro-seminar—that's the seminar that everybody had to take on a variety of topics—and it became clear that I knew a lot more than most of the other students who were there. There were a couple of areas like vision and physiology where I didn't know as much as everybody else. I knew plenty, but I didn't know as much. But in every other aspect of experimental psychology, they realized I was better prepared than most of those students. I could reel off the research and the names and I knew the facts and stuff. In class, I had the most to say about everything. It became clear this kid was really well-prepared.

Things calmed down very quickly after that and I fit myself in very well. And as I got to meet all the faculty, they really all liked me a lot. They all calmed down. I began to have a really good time, with the exception of Alan Schrier.

*And he was your advisor?*
He was my advisor. There was a point there when I thought I was not going to get my master's degree. He and I fought about everything, absolutely everything.

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*Is it fair to say that if it had been a better relationship you probably would have gone on and gotten your Ph.D. there as opposed to going back to John Hopkins?*
I didn't. No, I got my Ph.D. at Brown.

*Oh, you didn't leave Brown.*
I changed advisors after the master's. I was not going to let Alan chase me out of there or bully me. We actually had some long, hard conversations about things. One time, I got involved in trying to increase the number of black students. There were only eight of us at Brown when I got there—eight black graduate students.

*Period, no matter what department?*
And twenty-six undergraduates, period. Most of the undergraduates were sisters up at Pembroke when it was still separate, before they merged. And that was it. The eight of us, the eight students, black graduate students—seven of us were men—decided that we were going to develop a recruitment program. We were going to take some of our time and we were going to make sure that by the next year Brown had more black graduate students. We wrote a recruitment plan. We went to the deans. One of the deans is now president of a famous men's college in Georgia, and was no help at all. He was scared to death to do anything. He didn't even want to be seen talking to us. It was a damn shame, as a matter of fact, but we went on without him.

And, you know, the usual things—taking over the president's office, banging, lighting matches, the usual kinds of horsing around, growing our Afros as big as we could and acting as bad as we could. We finally got the attention of the deans and they agreed to support us financially to go off and recruit.

You know who else was there at the time who was one of the undergraduates, although she came a year later? Vera Bell. Vera and Charles Bell were there. They were both undergraduates.

*So when you were a graduate student, they were undergraduates.*
Yes, and I knew them both. It's amazing how things came around many years later. But in any case, we developed a recruitment plan and we began to go off to recruit. Alan didn't want me to go. Alan was giving me this line, "Your job is to do my research," and that's when we had our infamous screaming fight in the corridor, in the main corridor outside the chairman's office, where I remember calling Alan a goddamn racist and I told him, "I don't care what you think, I don't care about this degree, I'm going on this recruitment trip. If it means I've blown the master's degree, so much for it. I'll go to some other school and get it some other time, but before I leave this university there are going to be more black students here."

And by the time I got through screaming, half the faculty were looking out the door saying, "What's wrong with Isaac? What's wrong with Isaac?" And that precipitated a faculty meeting. A couple of hours later, the chairman, Jake Kling, called me into his office and said, "What was that all about? I know you and Alan haven't gotten along, but I've never heard anything like that." And I told him. I told him about the recruitment plan. I told him the need for Brown to have more students who looked like me, and the fact that I was going to be a part of that solution and that if the department wasn't willing to support it, too bad. He said, "I want you to know that we do support this, and it was entirely out of line for Alan to allow himself to get into that kind of screaming fight in the hallway with a student." And the department faculty met on that issue. I know that they called Alan on the carpet about that. After that, Alan's relationship with me changed tremendously.

*For the better or for the worse?*
For the better. It really shook him up that I called him a racist in front of his colleagues.

*You were a brave soul, my man.*
Probably kind of stupid, too. I was ready to blow the whole thing on that.

*But let me tell you, that was gutsy. One has to understand that period of time. That's why I say that, because I remember it very well.*
That was one of two things. So I went out on the trip and we were very successful. We convinced some students to come down. The second issue was that the department was getting a black faculty member. The result is that a guy named Ferdinand Jones came, and he's still down there.

*Oh yes, he's in charge of African-American studies—brilliant guy.*
Absolutely. Ferd Jones. I'm one of the people who's responsible for Ferd being there. In fact, I had to lead a march of students on the department to make that happen. Jake Kling had another round

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as chairman of the department at that point. He didn't want to meet us, but I had the keys to all the labs. I led about sixty students up to Jake's lab and we held him in that room until he agreed that the department was going to make a serious effort to locate and attract a black faculty member.

We had already done our homework. We had canvassed the entire nation looking for candidates. We actually asked people to apply. Ferd was one of them. He ended up with a half-time appointment in the department and the other half in medical. He was advising students who were having problems. That was another gutsy move near the end, when I was in my dissertation mode. At least I had a very supportive advisor then.

*How did you decide on your new advisor, because that's so critical in terms of you being able to get your Ph.D. from Brown?*

Actually, he had been lobbying me to leave Alan for a long time. This was Dick Millward. He had probably the most exciting stuff going. He was in human learning and cognition. He had great new ideas. He knew I was interested in learning and he used to just talk to me about the difficulties and the extreme time, lots of time involved, in doing learning experiments with monkeys, with monkeys and apes. In fact, it took forever. You had to have these research regimes that ran forever. He said, "Why don't you come work on the big monkeys," which is what he used to say—"Want to come work on the big monkeys? You'll have a much more exciting time and I'll be more supportive of you than Alan." He was one of the people talking to me. What was really happening was that the faculty were vying for me. He wanted me to come work with him.

Brian Shepp, who is now chair of the faculty—he's been chair of the faculty down there for a long time; I remember him very fondly for other things, he got me drinking, but that's another thing, some psychologist kind of thing—wanted me to come work with him. Einar Siqueland in child development wanted me to come work with him, and they were all really talking at me. They thought I was sort of being wasted in Alan's shop. And I had decided that after I got my master's in primate psychology and primate behavior that I was going to move on to some other area. So Dick had the most exciting stuff going and I went into his lab. There I got another dose of computers, because Dick bought the first digital PDP-8 that the university had and we had it in our lab to play with. It was that machine that I used to run my dissertation research. It allowed me to run four subjects simultaneously and independently and just generate reams of data.

I also met in that lab An Wang's son, Fred Wang, who was an undergraduate at Brown at that time. I had no idea at first for a long time who Fred was. I just knew this was Fred Wang. He was an undergraduate and he was helping out in the lab. It wasn't until I was doing the analysis of my data that I knew. We had at the time a calculator that was one of the cat's meow kind of things then, but there was only one for the lab and all the students were trying to use it. I needed access to it more than the other students, because I had a lot of data to crunch. I remember him saying, "Well, I think I can convince my father to lend you one of his calculators." And I didn't think much of it. I remember I thought, "Well, okay, maybe it's one of these TI calculators," and I said, "That's great." He said, "Well, it'll be in next week."

Then I remember being in the lab and this truck pulls up to the door and these guys come in and say, "We're looking for an Isaac somebody or another." I said, "That's me," and they said, "We've got a calculator for you." And I said, "Okay." These guys bring this hand truck in with a computer, the biggest damn computer on it, and plop this thing down beside my desk. And it's a Wang. I look and Fred comes in the door right after them, saying, "What do you think? What do you think?" I said, "Fred, is this the calculator?" He said, "Yes, my father is going to lend it to you as long as need it." I said, "Who the hell is your father?" And he said, "Right there." I'm looking, "Right where?" I'm looking at it. "Right there, Wang." I remember my jaw dropping open, because it just never occurred to me. I said, "That's your father? Wang of Wang Computers?" He said, "Yeah, that's my father, that's my Dad." He was just the nicest kid. And I had that machine there for a year. And it was mine, it was mine to use.

*That's fabulous. Is there something key you want to say about getting your Ph.D. at Brown?*

It was fun. I was in what ultimately turned out to be a very supportive department. It became clear after the initial hijinks that everyone was admitted into that department with the full understanding

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that they were capable of getting their Ph.D's and they were going to do it. Few of us fell by the wayside. Those who left, left because they just were no longer interested in that kind of research. But it was intended that we would get our research.

Still, I had a tougher road to follow than most others. I know now in retrospect, because I've talked to some of the people who were on my committee. One of the key people who intellectually gave me a very hard time, Peter Eimas, who was a psycholinguist—well-known guy—would just push and push and push. Nothing was ever good enough. No matter how much I did, it was never good enough. We had regular meetings. Most people had meetings once a semester, I wanted meetings once a month with my thesis committee. They were just raking me over the coals. "You're not working hard enough. You can do better than this. You're being lazy. This is not going to pass the muster."

Oh God, they gave me hell, but what emerged was a dissertation that was unassailable. At the time, I was thinking about whether to commit suicide or murder when it was getting down near the end. They were pressing me to refine more and more and more and to expand on this dissertation and to answer more questions and invent new statistics and put in more things to make my case. It turns out that my dissertation orals ended up being one of the longest orals in the department's history. Everybody came out. Everybody in the department—all the graduate students, all the faculty, people from other departments came to my dissertation orals. They lasted three hours—three hours of presentation and questions. And I was ready for everything, I was ready for everything. I had a valise not only with my formal presentation, but I had done graphs and charts and things for all kinds of questions that I could anticipate or that my committee had asked me about. These were the days when you didn't have a computer to just run off something. You had to do all these graphs and things by hand, putting all the dots on them. When somebody would ask me a question about the relationship of some aspect of my thesis to some other issue or something, I could almost always say, "Well, I have a graph on that," or, "I have some data on that," and I would turn to this thing and pull out something and talk. Then somebody else would ask me a question, "What do think about this?" "Well, let's go back to this data and I have some other interesting data that we might want to look at."

And it went on, and it went on, and it went on—for three solid hours. I remember leaving the room—everybody applauded—and being made to wait for about twenty minutes outside the door. Finally, Dick Millward came out and Jake Kling with him to say, "Congratulations, Dr. Colbert." At that point—I haven't talked about this stuff in years—I remember that my knees almost gave way on me at that point.

*When he told you that?*

When he told me, "Congratulations, Dr. Colbert." I remember, I really had to grab onto the door or something to keep myself from literally falling. It was the ordeal. I was up. I was really, really up for all of that. I knew there was nothing that they could ask me that I couldn't address. I felt very confident. I put on a show. You know how I am in front of a group when I have a captive audience. I put on a show. And they just kept at me with questions that didn't have anything to do with my dissertation, and I had answers for them. I had data. I could go up to the board and derive some equation for them, and I just put on a show. And then when it was all over, the enormity of it all just sort of hit me all at once. I remember I just couldn't move for a few minutes.

Then the students came out and they carted me off to some bar and we drank ourselves into a stupor. That's another story.

*Do you have any sense about how many blacks have received their Ph.D's in psychology at Brown at the time you received yours?*

Well, there was me. The year behind me was Juarlyn Gaiter, there was Judy Rice two years behind her. That's it.

*So you were essentially the second black person to get a Ph.D.*

I was the second black person and the first black male to get a Ph.D. in experimental psychology at Brown. And I never asked the question about how many other blacks were there, but there were only a handful of us there. There were only eight of us there when I arrived in '68.

*That's significant.*

And in the country, I know that when I completed my doctorate there was only one other black person in the entire country who com-

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pleted a Ph.D. in experimental psychology. And I only knew of one other black psychologist, experimental psychologist, period—Allen Counter, up at Harvard.

*Did he do his there too?*
No, he didn't do his at Brown. I don't remember where Allen got his. He was the only practicing black experimental psychologist I ever knew of or heard of at that time—Allen Counter. Of course, he's no longer doing that now either. Both of us have left the field.

*Let's move a little further down. You finished your Ph.D., and what next?*
Then I took a teaching job at Northeastern, probably the one professional mistake that I've made in my life.

*Talk about that.*
Part of the reason I did that, one of the guys who graduated before me—one of the students at Brown who finished a year before me—went to Northeastern to teach. I considered him to be a friend. A bunch of us used to always talk about psychology and argue back and forth, eat and drink together, and spend a lot of time together. He and his wife eventually went off to Northeastern. I actually left Brown in '72. I completed all my work by '74. I actually had my dissertation orals in '72.

But anyway, they convinced me to take a job at Northeastern rather than taking what was effectively a post-doc at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I didn't really want to go to Boulder. I didn't know anything about the place. I just knew the program was great there. The guy I would have been working with was an excellent, excellent person, and it would have been a real coup. But also, jobs were kind of hard to come by for experimental psychologists at that time, so it was a big deal that I was being offered this tenure-track faculty job at Northeastern University. They represented to me that they really wanted to start a whole area of cognitive psychology—my area—and that I was going to be the core of that faculty. So they talked me into coming to Northeastern.

I quickly found myself in a totally untenable situation. Of course, I knew I was going to be the only black faculty member in the department. I didn't know what that meant. I thought I knew what it meant, but I didn't know what it meant until I walked into that viper's nest. I found myself the only black faculty member, the only experimental psychologist in the whole department among a group of people who were the classical Skinnerian psychologists—conditioning—who didn't believe that you could do any research and thinking and reasoning, didn't even want to hear about it, didn't want to talk about it. I had no real professional solid positive contact with these people.

*Why did they hire you, then?*
Because they wanted a black face in the department and someone to hold up to the increasing number of black psychology majors at Northeastern. One of the largest enrollments among private schools in the country, at that time they had eight thousand students, part-time and full-time. And here I was, a black psychology professor. Before I knew it, I had hundreds, literally hundreds of students at me wanting me to be their advisor. They just completely overwhelmed me. At one point near the end of the first year, one of the secretaries in the department made a stupid mistake and put out on the student table the list of faculty phone numbers. Students got that phone number and my life was a living hell. The students really needed help. I mean, these were people who were desperate for some help and advice from somebody who looks like them. They would call me. I would get calls, "You know, I'm so sorry to call you at home, but you're so busy at school and I can't get you at school and I need help." This just went on and on and on. It was just driving me crazy.

The long and short of it is that I left Northeastern four years later, pre-ulcerous, 135 pounds. I tried to do everything, I was trying to do everything. The president, Rider, at the time and the dean, Jack Curry, who is the president and is stepping down now, were always at me. There were fourteen black faculty. I was one of three or four who were in a science-related area. They were at us all the time to be on university committees. When the president or the dean asks you to be on a committee, how can you say no?

*With all the other pressures that you had?*
They didn't care. They wanted representation. They would ask. If I would say no in the department, well, Rider would call me up or make sure he'd come in—"We really need you on this committee, we really need you to do this." "Okay." So I tried to

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do everything. I tried to run my research. I had a couple of master's students. I inherited a doctoral student whom nobody else could get through to his doctorate, and I did. I had two master's students at the time, so I had their research going. I was trying to get research funding in. I was teaching more than anybody else in the department. I taught four courses a quarter. And I had to do extra teaching because I found these students were so poorly prepared. They didn't know advanced behavioral statistics—oh, it's a long, long story.

This thing just spiraled downhill when I found out what this department was really doing. They actually had created a means by which the faculty could avoid teaching by having undergraduates teach these sections in program learning modules. Well, the long and short of it was the students would come out of these courses with A's and know nothing. I taught most of the advanced level and graduate courses. I would find these students getting into my class and I'd ask them to do a one-way analysis of variance, take some data and do P times Q times R analysis variance of fixed effects. They'd look at me like I had just stepped out of a spaceship or something. I ended up having to offer remedial courses in statistics. I was teaching other kinds of things. And then every time somebody got sick in the department, I got asked to teach, to fill in for them, teach their courses.

I was absolutely going crazy. It finally blew up three years down the line, when the then chairman of the department had written a book about a wild child. In any case, he tried to press me into teaching somebody's course, some course or other. I don't remember what it was, but it was way out of my field, and I told him no. We got into a real argument about that and I finally asked him, "Can you teach that course?" He's telling me, "Well, any good psychologist ought to be able to teach this course." I said, "Can you teach that course?" He said, "That's beside the point." I said, "Can you teach that course, yes or no ?" And he said, "Well, that's …" I said, "The answer is no, isn't it?" I remember my exact lines. I said, "Well, you …" And I told him, "I want to announce to you right now, next year is going to be my last year in this department." He said, "Well, you know you'll be coming up for early tenure decision." I said, "I don't want it, I don't want it."

At that point I made up my mind to get out of Northeastern. It was at that point three years in that I came across the river, because I couldn't talk to any of my colleagues in the department about my work.

*What do you mean, you came across the river?*
I came here to MIT.

*Was that to come to a job, or you just wanted to communicate with people?*
I wanted to come and talk to somebody in my field, in my arena, who wouldn't look at me or react to me as though I was absolutely crazy or stupid.

Before we get into the pain and anger and dismay, let me just go back very briefly to something that was pretty important to me in my childhood that I didn't really mention because the people involved weren't specifically influential, but the experiences were. I spent a lot of time acting as a kid, starting from the third grade really. My first big role as Hansel in a Hansel and Gretel operetta, that sort of kicked that whole thing off. All through high school, I was very much involved in acting, one-act plays and stuff on stage. I had a radio program on Saturday mornings through the libraries and got pretty well-known through Baltimore for all that kind of stuff. The people involved weren't terribly influential. Many of the names I don't remember. I just remember generally what jerks they were and how self-centered most of them were.

But I learned a number of things out of it. I certainly learned how to be very comfortable in front of a group of people. I know you see that and you know I'm a ham from way back. Give me a group of people and it's hard to restrain me. It taught me a lot about being comfortable on my feet in front of people. It taught me a certain number of basic skills about memorizing things and extemporaneous speaking and being comfortable and stuff like that. But I stopped all of that stuff by the time I got to college and I haven't been back on the stage since then. But that was pretty important for me at that time. It gave me certain fundamental skills that have paid off for the rest of my life so far.

But on to Northeastern—back to Northeastern, forward to Northeastern—and why that was such a mistake for me. Once I had discovered experimental psychology and gotten excited about the areas in which I had my early professional and intellectual interests and saw that I could be very successful at it and I had a lot of good ideas, I had

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planned a career in academics, sort of a traditional academic career of teaching and research. If you had asked me around the time I completed my Ph.D. when I was about twenty-five or so, I would have very confidently said, "I'm going to be a tenured faculty member somewhere teaching, doing research, and developing new generations of students," and certainly making an impact as one of few African-Americans in my area. Well, when I finished Brown, I really had an option of going to work out at the University of Colorado at Boulder in a lab of a very well-known person who was doing research related to mine in thinking and reasoning and mathematical models of learning. Then friends of mine from graduate school days convinced me to come over to Northeastern where there was a pretty young faculty.

At Northeastern there was sort of a split between young faculty and old faculty. They were supposedly beginning to reshape the department and led me to believe that they wanted me there as the vanguard of a movement into the cognitive area. I knew that everybody there at the time had a very different perspective. I knew they were in the conditioning mode and using that particular old-fashioned approach to psychology—Skinnerian, Skinner's approach—these elaborate conditioning models with lengthy abstruse strings of tenuous logic, but that's another thing. And I knew there were a couple of big names there—people like Murray Sidman, who was very well-known for avoidance conditioning, well-known for Sidman avoidance conditioning, and people like that. So I knew going there that I was going to be somewhat of a fish out of water, but I thought that since my two friends were there that I would at least have some base of support there.

Well, I got to Northeastern in the fall of '72, knew that I was going to be the only black professor there, but I really had no idea of what that was going to be like.

*The only black professor in the department?*

In the department, and one of fourteen at the whole school. Other people who were there at the time—let's see, Ramona Edelin was there as a young faculty member. Oh my goodness, I'm forgetting some of these names now. He came in a couple of years later. I know you know him. He was head of the African American Institute, Greg.

*Greg Ricks.*

Greg Ricks was there at that time, a number of other people. There were fourteen of us, and we were all under pressure all the time from the departments, from the deans, from the president on down to really be involved in some of their agendas—to be on committees, seeking our advice on this that and another. It was endless. It was absolutely endless all the time. I had no idea. No one had ever said to me what that part of academic life was going to be like.

I quickly found myself in the department being one of a handful of teaching drones. There were few assistant professors in the department, and we did all the teaching. We did it all. I was teaching four courses a quarter—four courses a quarter and trying to get my research off the ground, applying for grant support. There's nobody in the department who was trying to be a mentor to me, including and especially my friends, whose names will go unmentioned here but who are still rather prominent in their corners of the field. No one was saying, "These are things you should do and these are things you shouldn't do," or "These are things you ought to think about."

In faculty meetings, in formal or informal faculty meetings when we would really talk about professional things, no one wanted to hear about my professional fields. No one wanted to hear about the things I was interested in. When I would bring up the kinds of ideas I was thinking about, they were all saying, "Well, that's crazy. You can't do that. No one can do research in this field. We don't believe that this is valid." There was nobody there who was willing to say, "Well, wait a minute, perhaps we ought to think about this. Let's see if we can find a way to be supportive of this." I was very much a social outcast and a professional outcast in that department.

*So nobody accepted any of the creativity that you brought to the department?*

Absolutely not, absolutely not. None of them, none—not a bit. I was treated as though I just stepped off a spaceship from another planet with these strange ideas. For the first half year or so, I thought, "Well, maybe these are just rites of passage in this department and I just have to deal with this." But it became clear after that that these were not rites of passage, that this was going to be the state of affairs. As more and more courses were piled on me and the other two junior faculty and

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we saw the senior faculty weren't teaching at all—I mean, at all—that became a real burden.

Add to that the demands. They were really pressing demands from the dean, the president, and the provost to be involved in university-level committees and help them and sort of be the black face in the meeting. I found myself two years down the road at 135 pounds having stomach trouble. In fact, by the time I left Northeastern and came here, I was pre-ulcerous because of all the pressures of trying to do everything and be everything and having no guidance, no input, nobody who was willing to say, "You're trying to do too much," or, "Those are things you shouldn't waste your time on; this is what you need to do." I knew I had to grind out research, but I was grinding out research that the department certainly didn't respect. I figured if they didn't respect my research, how was I going to get tenure? And there were no colleagues to talk to.

So by the third year at Northeastern, I decided, "This is it. There's no way I'm going to spend my career here and I think I've made a fundamental mistake in what I want to do with my life." I began to really doubt myself.

*Actually doubt what you were doing in that profession?*
Absolutely.

*Did you stop at that point and just make up your mind that this was not going to be a place where you were going to be and you began to look and then you ran into the idea or the possibility of going to MIT?*
No, what brought me over to MIT first was a need for affirmation of some of my own ideas. I wasn't so willing at first. There were a number of things that began to crystallize for me. One was my two friends who clearly were not friends and never, never came forward to be helpful, so I just sort of cut off relations with them. Two, there was my own sense that I had good ideas. If these people didn't respect them, it's because they somehow must be threatened by new ways of looking at things, new ways of doing things. So I thought, "Well, these aren't the people I need to be talking to. Maybe if I can establish some collegial links elsewhere, I'll be able to come back to an even keel."

So I just sort of went back to some of my research papers and stuff and just looked at some of the names of people and colleagues who I knew were in the area, and thought, "Maybe I'll just go and visit." The person's work who was closest to mine at the time and had very similar interests was Molly Potter, in the psychology department at MIT. She was doing very similar research, the concept part of it. So I thought, "Maybe I'll just go over to MIT and find the psychology department and just sit down and talk with her for a few minutes, see if I can get a few minutes with her and just talk to her about what I'm doing. If she thinks my ideas are silly, that there's no merit to my ideas, then maybe there's something fundamentally wrong."

So I just one day picked up, came across the river, drove over here to MIT. I remember asking five people how to find the psychology department. You know, when you first show up on this campus, everything is numbers. Can I find these numbers? The long and short of it is that she was in. I just sort of popped in, introduced myself, and said, "I'd really like to talk to you for just a few minutes, if you have a few minutes." She said, "Well, I can give you half an hour. I'm not busy now. I can give you half an hour if you can wait five minutes so I can finish this up."

I won't forget that conversation. We started to talk and maybe three hours later we were still sitting there talking. We were very excited. She was very excited about and interested in the thoughts and ideas I had and how they dovetailed with hers. She told me about work that she and a research assistant—Barbara Ertel—were doing. She called Barbara in and the three of us sat there and talked and we decided we were going to do some collaborative research. We outlined some research and for the next year, I spent probably more time here than over there at Northeastern. It really rebuilt my confidence in my own ideas.

I did some work over there. I did some of the research activities over there in my own lab, but by that point I just wanted to be the hell out of there. The people didn't have anything to say to me, so why the hell would I want to spend my time around there? I very briefly toyed with the idea of going back to Johns Hopkins. I got in touch with some of my old faculty back there. They were very excited about the idea of my coming back to Hopkins. They rolled out the red carpet, the moon and sixpence. But I didn't want to go back to Baltimore.

*Too much home there for you.*
Not only too much home, but about half a mile from home was the worst thing. Yes, too much

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home. I have little anonymity in Baltimore. My mother and folks are well-known. It just wasn't going to work out. I just felt I'd be smothered if I got back home. To this day, I kind of wonder whether that was a mistake, not to go back. They had a computer lab for me and showed me the computer and had some fourteen-year-old genius who was going to be a lab assistant and graduate student—a fourteen-year-old.

*And this was a faculty position as well?*
Yes, it was a tenure-track faculty position. They were going to bring me up for tenure in two years. I remember this deal because I really struggled with it, I really struggled with it. This was about '76, mid-winter—about this time, actually, twenty years ago.

*Time does go by.*
It does. By this time I had had that major fight with my department head. I told him that I was not going to be a candidate for tenure, so I knew that gave me a year to get the hell out of there. After the wonderful reception back at Johns Hopkins, I really thought, "Is this where I want to take my life? Maybe I need to experiment with something else for a while and prove to myself this is what I really want to do." I thought about a post-doc and I thought about doing something very different.

Well, there was interest in me coming over to MIT on the research staff. I thought, "That would be interesting, but somewhat more of the same. I think I need to do something very different with myself." I thought, "All right, here's what I'm going to do." I had worked my way, I kept myself in steak and lobsters through graduate school by taking advantage of my skill with statistics. I had gotten involved. I met someone at a party, some party along the way early on in graduate school, from a consulting firm that was based in Providence. We happened to get into this conversation and they were looking for somebody to just do some statistical analyses for them. I said, "Oh fine, I can do that." So on weekends, I'd spend lots of weekends just grinding out statistics for these folks, making at the time $150 a day doing this sort of stuff. This was big money. This was big money for a poor graduate student. Folks were always wondering why I could always afford the food. Because I was working my tail off. But it gave me a whole different thing that I could do. I got involved with some of their management training programs.

This is how I ended up working for Adam and Maureen Yagodka, because it turned out that one of the jobs this consulting firm got was a job in Newport, Rhode Island, when the Navy fleet was still there. They were supposed to be doing some human relations training down there and my initial job had been to help design the program with the statistical analysis in mind. But quickly it evolved into my being part of the program team to go down there, work with them. There was one other black person on the team.

That's how I got introduced to actually doing management training and Lincoln Lab-type management training in an extremely hostile setting, because we were down there dealing with Navy ship captains. They were absolutely the most unrepentant bigots I've seen ever. You couldn't tell these folks anything about anything. They were just hostile, period. Many of them had master's and doctorates—real know-it-alls, foul-mouthed know-it-alls—and did not want to be told they had to change anything. That was a real experience, a real experience. So I learned how to work with hostile groups. I found that work was interesting and satisfying.

So I thought, "Well, maybe this is something I want to try to do for a while." It just happened that spring, I got invited to a party and there were these two strangers at this party who turned out to be Adam and Maureen. They told me about the work they were doing here at MIT, the appointment they had just gotten. "So if you're ever interested, let us know." That was in '76. It was late fall of '76 that I finally gave them a call. I saw an ad in the Sunday paper that said something about MIT looking for people doing training. I thought, "I wonder if it's those two people." I had the card and I called them up. I called them up and I got Buzzy. Remember Buzzy Bluestone?

*Oh yes. Buzzy Bluestone, was it?*
Yes, Buzzy Bluestone. We talked for a little while and he said, "You should apply for this job." So I sent in my resumé and forgot about it. I didn't hear anything more. I was doing consulting work at that time, with Massport and lots of other places. Consulting was fun when the work was there. I made lots of money when the work was there and then worried about the next job—this up and down, up and down stuff.

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*Now you had left Northeastern?*
I left Northeastern.

*Just consulting.*
I was happy to leave. There were members of the department who really showed me a nice time on the way out. "It was exciting work," and I'm sort of wondering, "Why the hell didn't you say something along the way? You support it when I'm going out the damn door."

*That's always the case.*
But in any case, I left Northeastern angry and bitter at them and very angry at myself for putting up with that for four years. At least the experience with Molly Potter and her people here at MIT reaffirmed my confidence in what I was doing.

*This is 1977?*
'Seventy-seven. Along the way here I remember trying to get in touch with my old advisor, Dick Millward. Two things, Dick was getting sick. He never told anybody he had cancer, but he was getting sick. Dick made very clear that he was unhappy with me for leaving the field. He wasn't very much help in my getting the job to begin with. I remember noticing how much more help he was to the white boys than he was to me. I couldn't help noticing that either, but I got a better job. It turned out I came out of the chute with a better job than any of them at that time. That's another whole line. I wasn't terribly upset because I just sort of had moved on, figured okay—that's probably par for the course.

But then I come here to MIT. The long and short of it is I didn't hear from this job. I had sent in the resumé late fall. I didn't hear anything until March of '77. I had completely forgotten about it. I just figured they saw my resumé, they see that I'm primarily academic, they're not interested. But it turns out this is the way things happen around MIT. Right now I know that's not unusual.

I remember clearly I was home on a stormy March day in '77. I was living in Canton at that time and the lights had gone, the electricity had gone off. My heat was electric and I had a Coleman heater, camped out in the bedroom waiting for the electricity to come back on. The phone rings and it's Buzzy Bluestone saying, "I know you think we've forgotten all about you, but no, we've gone through a lot of candidates and we really want to talk to you." So the long and short is that it took about three months of processing, back and forth, doing training exercises with them, shaking everybody's hand, being inspected from stem to stern basically, but it was clear in short order that they wanted to bring me in.

I came in and I decided to take this job. In some respects, it was a financial step back because it was less money than I had been making before, but I decided, "Well, I'm willing to take that risk because I think they're going to find out I'm good. I'll make that up in due time. Besides which, I'm only going to be there a couple of years anyway."

*When you look back at '77, can you reflect a little bit on your overall experience at MIT? Identify what you consider of special significance in your professional life, also in connection with your collegiate relationships and things like that.*
I've really enjoyed the years that I've spent here at MIT. I mean, there were a couple that I might not want to live through again, but I think the thing that's been special about MIT for me is that pretty much from the very beginning, there was a recognition that I had something to offer and pretty much the freedom to offer it.

I clearly remember a couple of things. When I first met John Wynne, and I had a chance to talk to him, I remember all this talk from Adam and Maureen about the vice president coming down and they were scared to death of him. John and I first met at one of those programs out at Lincoln. He was participating that day and we started to talk and we did really hit it off. I liked him immensely. Jim Culliton I met at that program, and of course Joan Rice was there and you were there and Mary Rowe was there. I thought, "Wow, this is fun," with people like this around here supporting these programs. I think those programs went pretty smoothly. We worked very effectively as a team, and I contributed as much as anybody else to them.

*Compare your impression of the people whom you were dealing with and things you were doing here versus overall, if you look at your experience in other places like Northeastern.*
Oh, I have one word—quality. There is no doubt about it. In my mind, it was the most exciting thing and still is about MIT. There is a level of professional accomplishment, quality, assumption of competence, demand for more, the demand to work at your peak level all the time. It's unlike any place I've ever experienced before, with the exception of Johns Hopkins, where again you can

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never quite do enough but there is a high degree of intrinsic self-motivation expected of you. I found that you could absolutely rely on people to have done their homework and they demanded that you do the same thing. If you prove yourself to be competent and effective, things would come. People would cede responsibility to you. They would listen to your ideas and give you opportunities to do more.

I thought, fair enough. I was really rather surprised at that. I noticed it very quickly, even with Adam and Maureen, as suspicious as they were of anybody sort of doing things that they didn't approve of first. I found very quickly that, "Hey, all these other people outside respect what I'm doing so I can write this and I can do that. I can contact them about that or the other and I can arrange this." I very quickly found this is a place that if you're willing to be a little entrepreneurial and take a few risks, and you've done good work, then people say, "Sure, go on."

That was very exciting to me. Two years down the road, when I first thought I was going to leave, I remember very clearly how hard it came about. Adam and Maureen always wanted to know and wanted a full report if you ever talked to anybody senior outside. They were scared to death of this.

*Outside of the program?*

Outside of the program or outside of the department. They didn't want anybody going to see or talking to any senior officer because they were really scared to death of their own position here. They had some good reason to be, but again they had reasons not to be. I just thought that was just unreasonable. You didn't see anybody else operating that way.

*Sort of contradictory to what everybody else was doing.*

Exactly. I thought it was completely foolish. I just decided, "Well, I've had enough of this, two years of this." I just wanted to go over and tell John—because he insisted on my calling him John, everybody was always calling him Mr. Wynne—that I was going to leave. So I just walked over, I just made an excuse, walked from my office and walked over to him. Marge Lech was his secretary then. I don't know if you remember Marge. She was a wonderful person. I just stopped in and said, "Is John in? I need to go talk to him." "Oh yeah, he's doing such-and-such but I know he'll see you." I remember her words. "And if he doesn't have time now, I'll take something off his calendar." She stuck her head in and John said, "Sure, come on in." I told John that I just wanted him to be the first to know that I was planning to move on, that I planned to come here and spend a couple of years, that I thought I had done pretty well here and now I was ready to move on. And he said, "You shouldn't do that."

In the course of the conversation, he started talking about me coming over to work with him. He said he needed a new assistant equal opportunity officer and, while that might not be something I would really be interested in, there were things that I could accomplish from that. I sort of said, "Like what?" He talked to me about being in a position to see the Institute from the top and to learn about an institution like MIT in ways that few people have opportunities to do. I thought, "Hmm." I remember then going out on a limb, saying, "Well, that would be worthwhile if I would be able to come in and just talk with you about things on my mind." He said, "Of course you would. I get here at 7:30 in the morning if you're willing to get up early and come in." In fact, we made an arrangement. I told him, "Well, I don't want Adam and Maureen to know about this because they're scared to death." He said, "Well, I'm the vice president here and if I want you to stay, you'll stay."

We made all the arrangements. We had several quasi-secret conversations there, made all the arrangements, and then when I was ready to go, I just sprung it and announced it one day. I remember that created some turmoil in the office, but I just announced, "I'm leaving, here's what I'm going to do, I'm going to be working for Wynne."

This was mid-June, the end of June—June 26, 1979. So I went over to become assistant equal opportunity officer with John. Here are the players who were over there. It was John, Marge Lech was there—in fact, Marge was I think about to leave, getting ready to leave at that time. Linda Linton was there working for Jim Culliton, and down the hall was Constantine—Character Constantine Simonides. Everybody said you had to be careful of Constantine Simonides. I don't think I had been there more than a week before I met Constantine. I liked him instantly. I thought here is a guy who I really like immensely. He had this way of just sort of being very warm in approaching you. But I saw the other side too. I

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saw very quickly about that black chair of his. We had a big laugh about that because the first time I remember he got me in the office—do you remember that black leather chair he used to have?

*Oh, yes.*

He would get you to sit and lean back in that chair and then he starts pumping you. Then I sort of remembered telling him after that first time, "I'm not sitting in that chair anymore. You know, Constantine, I'm a psychologist and I know just what you're doing."—"What am I doing?" We really had a nice relationship.

So when John Wynne decided, quite suddenly from my perspective, to retire, I remember being kind of shocked and angry about it that day. Constantine was going to be my new supervisor and I thought, okay. John timed this very well. John left in March of '80, and it was probably late '79 or early 1980 when we had kind of maneuvered my first major policy venture.

The Academic Council was struggling with a review of search documents. The long and short is that I made the proposal to the Academic Council, my very first time going there. Jerry Wiesner was president and Rosenblith was provost. I remember meeting Rosenblith, the sort of fire-breathing dragon, and we both hit it off well. He found I was a psychologist, and his wife is a psychologist. We both had a great time meeting with each other. I could do no wrong from Walter's point of view. We were really on friendly terms from the first day. I remember making this proposal to the Council that, "Hey, as assistant equal opportunity officer, I'm willing to review all these documents and work with the senior officers if they're willing to work with me to get things cleaned up so that by the time any one of these gets to the Council, everybody can be a winner. But that requires that I be able, if I see something I think is an issue, to talk to the office involved—if necessary, talk to the senior officer involved—and try to straighten things out along the way."

*Now, you made this recommendation at the Academic Council meeting?*

At the Academic Council meeting.

*Interesting. So that's how that process started.*

Right. And they bought it. There was nobody who challenged it. I mean, you could have swept me off the floor with a dust rag at that time because I really expected them to blast me through the walls on this.

*Which is such a contrast to Northeastern, for example, about accepting your ideas and all that kind of thing.*

Right. I mean, I was floating. I walked out of there floating on a cloud. I had talked with John about this and with Jim Culliton about this, and he thought it was a good idea. But nobody was certain that the Council would buy this. John was kind of pushing me forward. There was a part of me saying, "Yeah, I'm going to be cannon fodder up here, but we'll see." I was willing to go forth and I had made the rounds.

One of the first things I did as assistant equal opportunity officer was make the rounds of every department head, every senior officer, and just sit and talk, so that I would get some sense of who they are and they would know who I am. So I wasn't really a stranger by the time I came to the Council on this. When I look back on all that, I think John had done some paving of the way on all of this.

*You bring up a very good point about John, but spend just a minute talking about who the people are who really you feel were extremely helpful in terms of your development.*

Oh, I can name them. I can name them pretty quickly, not necessarily in order of significance, but in order of coming to mind right now—Joan Rice, who was one of the first people I met here under Buzzy, and it's because of her ability to think through to the issues; John Wynne; you (and in fact in terms of black folks, I don't know what I would have done if you weren't here, I don't know how I would have survived if you weren't here); Jim Culliton; Constantine Simonides; and Frank Perkins. Now, there were other people who were always very supportive and very helpful, but few as influential as those people. It's interesting, these are all people I've worked for and with all the way along.

*When I think about all the positions you've held, I think it's also significant for you to at least go through all of them for the record, because you are very unique in that sense. You mentioned assistant equal opportunity officer and all the stuff that went along with the development of several things that continue to be in existence.*

There are some things that I'll mention here, probably for the first time. I came in as senior consultant in training, particularly for this program out at Lincoln Lab. I think I was very effective in that. Then I became assistant equal opportunity officer, and there I developed the first utilization availabil-

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ity analysis that we used here. I rewrote the plan. That was like doing a second dissertation.

*Wasn't this the time also that we were held up as being the institution in the country that had done all this?*
That had done all this. That's right, absolutely.

*And you were the equal opportunity officer at that time.*
I was assistant EEO at that time. There was a lot of activity from the Department of Labor. We were having compliance reviews. I thought it necessary to recast our affirmative action plan and our statistics and EEO mode because we were doing it our own way. I did most of it by hand with two people helping—"Cookie," Claire Paulding, who eventually ended up working with me in another way, and a white male graduate student from Sloan. He just showed up in my office, a guy named Kevin Lonnie. Then there was the review of the search plans, the most centralized review of search plans and equal opportunity activity we've ever had. It's really gone in a completely different direction since then, so I scared the hell out of them or something. From there, I became manager of faculty and staff information services in the personnel office. That came directly out of the EEO stuff, since I worked so closely with personnel and getting the data was so difficult. It was clear that something needed to be done with those systems.

*What did you like most about that particular position?*
The chance to really reorganize something, the chance to make a big impact on an organization. In addition to getting that computer system up and running, I took two offices—the faculty records office and personnel records office—combined them into one and downsized them, computerized them more heavily.

But the piece that I probably feel most proud about is that I took a lot of steps and was very successful in raising the morale of those people and their self-respect. When I went into that office, the personnel records office, they couldn't even dial outside: their phones were class B phones and they couldn't dial outside. They were made to feel like third-class citizens. They were in the dingiest spot in the whole office structure. They just never felt good about themselves on anything. I remember that foolish sink that was there. People would just sort of come in and dump their dirty dishes and stuff in that sink and expect those folks to just take care of them and clean them up. They were really the bottom of the barrel in that office and treated as such. They weren't even allowed to go take care of any personal responsibilities without being treated like children.

So I cleaned that up. I took a couple of years, brought additional lighting in there, I changed the phones in there, I changed the desks in there, I had it carpeted, I cut that foolish sink in half and told folks, "If you don't clean up your own dishes, I'm getting the rest of this thing out of here. Don't ever do this." The morale went up. I brought in Digital Equipment plus IBM terminals. Once the system was up and running, I trained people on how to use them, showed them how to do their work more efficiently and effectively, and treated them with the respect and the dignity that they deserved. And they worked their hearts out for me. I turned out some of the best support staff, I think, in the Institute. People were clamoring for my folks.

*I witnessed that.*
The second thing I'm very pleased with was the faculty records office. It was an elite operation, elitist operation—it wasn't terribly elite, but it was elitist. I managed to not only meld them in but change the person who was managing that office. I got her out of there without firing her. She's still at MIT, so I won't use her name. She had been promoted into a management position with no training whatsoever and was basically a glorified secretary, scared to death it turns out, and therefore very resistant to anybody finding out what it was she was doing and how inept the whole operation really was. But as I struggled, it took a year of struggle with her for this, finally I decided—look, she had been here for twenty years and she had been giving good service to the organization. I would not feel good firing her, but I had many, many good excuses to fire her and there were times when I was in a hair's breadth of doing it. So what I did was to find another role for her in another part of personnel. Joan was director of personnel services at that time and Jim was director of personnel, Jim Culliton. I worked it out with him and boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, she was put into a new position that was a significant position but didn't require her to manage anybody.

Three months later, I'll never forget it, she came to my office and sat down with me and said, "You know, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me. Thank you." I had to sit down. "Thank you so much. I was scared to death most every day that you would realize I didn't know

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what I was doing." I was thinking to myself, "I realized that very early on." I really appreciated her coming back to say, "You could have fired me. There were lots of things you could do, but you found something productive for me. I'm very, very happy. Thank you." We're on great speaking terms even today. So I didn't have to fire her.

*A lot of it had to do with your way of actually dealing with people, respect for people in that sense.*
The other thing I'm proud of is Cookie.

*I was wondering when you were going to get that. Say a word or two about that, because that's important.*
Claire was a secretary. They weren't menial things that she was doing, but they were things that were under-utilizing her obvious skills in the wage and salary area. They weren't allowing her to advance. I have to give my predecessor George Petievich credit for saying, "You ought to take a look at her because I think she's interested in programming and maybe she could be helpful to you." I talked with Cookie and found out not only was she interested in programming, but she had already taken all kinds of steps to learn whatever the language was at that time. She knew it at a fairly high level and started doing little programs all on her own to get data and stuff and do number-crunching. I thought, "Hey, wait a minute." We talked about it and I said, "I want to make you my associate here. Do you want to do this? You can do this and I'll be there to support you." I gave Cookie the opportunity to do it and what a pair we made, what a team we made. We rebuilt, we shook that office up, and really made that office what it is.

*That was a genius move.*
She's great to work with.

*Yes, but I think it took somebody like you to recognize that kind of hidden talent.*
I'm happy that she was there to develop, and I'm happy that it was an African-American woman. It was clear that no one else was going to give her that opportunity. We became real partners in that endeavor and we found some others. There was Anne Quill, who is no longer here. Anne Quill had been working in another part of the area—a white woman, just for the record—again, very interested in programming and showed real talent that only needed an opportunity to develop. Anne became a superb programmer. With the combination of Cookie, Anne, and me, we really set up quite an office there. We had some wonderful people who moved on to other things around MIT, including Paul Church and other people.

*How did you get from there to where you are now?*
Computers, which took on a life of their own. That experience in personnel records stuff brought me to the attention of Jim Bruce and Cecelia d'Oliveira. They were looking for "a savvy user" to try to convince Bill Dickson and the other senior administration to support the idea of a strategic plan for administrative computing. They came down and talked to me about that and I agreed to work with them. It turns out that the three of us ended up squirreling ourselves away for four months to develop a strategic plan that eventually put microcomputers on every administrative desk in this Institute.

*That's major.*
That was directly responsible for all of that. The plan we came up with didn't really get funded, because John Deutch had promised us money—he was provost by then—and then pulled the rug out from under us. Still, a substantial part of their agenda was implemented. It was around that time that I started getting job offers outside to be manager of information systems, doing all this IS-related stuff that I didn't want to do.

The next person who I know was key in this, but she never really admitted it, was Margaret MacVicar. I will never forget the comment she made to me in the hallway out of the blue. Jim and Joan happened to be standing there talking to me. Margaret comes up sort of à propos of nothing and says to me, "You're Ike Colbert, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, you're Margaret MacVicar. I know you, but we've never had a chance to meet." She said, "You've got an academic background, don't you?" I said, "Yes," knowing full well that somehow she had gotten hold of my resumé and knew exactly what was on there. She said, "Have you ever thought about going back to the academic side of the house?" I said, "I've thought about going back to classrooms or something for a while. It's been a long time and I don't know if I could do that." She said, "Yes, but there are other things you can do on the academic side of the house. Have you ever given that any thought?" I said, "Well, I thought about it from time to time." She said, "What if somebody made a proposition to you? Would you give it some

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thought?" I said, "Sure." She said, "Fine," and she turned around and walked away.

I remember looking surprised—"What was that all about?" Nobody knew. I didn't give it any more thought. Some months later, I got a call from Frank Perkins, who had worked with me on one of the sub-tasks of the strategic plan I was doing in telecommunications. Frank was the only faculty member who was a part of that staff, and I will never forget how Frank threw himself into that. I met him and I really liked this man. He was associate provost at that time. I never forgot how he threw himself into that. He didn't know anything about it, picked up, wanted to learn, really was a part of that team, and we produced some good results.

*Sort of like you.*
Yes, I guess so. Then I got this call from Frank in '88 asking me if I would consider being associate dean of the graduate school. I said, "Yes," but I didn't want a black-focus job. Along the way here I had been working for Jim Culliton for a two-year stint as his information systems person, trying to bring order. This is another painful thing—two years of bringing order and reasoning to financial computing, taking the financial computing area and getting these guys to sit down and talk with one another for the first time. That was very painful for everybody concerned. It was very painful, but it worked. I tried to bring some coherence to their plans for acquiring new computers.

*Now, this is working with all of the directors of those departments that reported to Jim?*
Absolutely, all of them.

*I remember that.*
CAO, purchasing, OSP, the registrar, all the financial systems people, everybody. I brought them kicking and screaming to the table to talk to one another. Finally, gradually, they began to see how valuable it was to share information. I knew, but even still it was kicking and balking and screaming about everything. I told Jim, two years of that and I'm leaving. I took two years and in fact I was ready to take one of those jobs outside of MIT at this point.

Then Frank called me. We made a good deal. I thought it was going to be a black-focus job because of the way I viewed John Turner's job, but it was the way John had chosen to do the job. Frank told me he wanted somebody to come and run the office and bring some coherence to the office.

I came in and found a fair amount of administrative chaos and immediately introduced systems and started hiring people—hiring a lot of black folks, too—to bring some coherence and some new faces to that office. I brought in students of various ethnic backgrounds, I brought in people of color, very competent people. We brought that office back into shape. Since then I've gotten involved with the reengineering effort that defined a lot of this stuff, what we're doing now.

What ended up being the most difficult, thankless piece of all of it was the public relations piece with the faculty, which was a one-person effort for the fall term and I had a team for the spring term. I think we made some genuine headway with the faculty on that. I know I didn't burn any bridges and I think my stock improved as a result of that.

*You're one of the few administrators since I've been here, I think, who actually has worked in almost every dimension of the administrative side of the house, and in very high-level kinds of positions, to be able to see all of them in a very unusual way.*
Yes, I've been lucky.

*And on the academic side as well, which is really what you're more involved in now. I don't know of anybody who actually has been in that kind of role before, and I think that's one of the reasons why you have so much knowledge about so many things.*

*I think it's important to ask you, when you look at all of that experience, what advice might you offer to other blacks who are entering the MIT environment, whether as an administrator or as a faculty member? You have seen both sides so well.*
I think it's important to be flexible, not to have a fixed idea of where you're going, and to be prepared to make some sidesteps—lateral moves, if you will—to broaden your experience. In places like this, it's important to learn as much as you can about how it functions and who the people are who function in it, and to try to develop ways to be productive while building relationships with people. Notice I didn't say, "Get along," I said to be productive while building relationships with people and to learn to work very effectively with people, some of whom you may not even like—but still to get along, to get along in that respect with them, to be clear in your agenda and on their

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agenda, to find a way to make things work and to make everybody a winner if possible.

Most importantly, I think you've got to have a very clear idea of what you're about, why you're here, what you're trying to accomplish at a given time, and to have a clear idea of who you are, too. One of the things you have to put up with along the way are a lot of nay-sayers, a lot of people who are all too willing—too eager—to assault what they think are your sensibilities if they believe that those assaults are going to push you in a direction that's favorable to their agenda. You really ought to be clear about what it is you're trying to achieve, clear about yourself, and not be distracted by other people's agendas so easily. That's easier said than done. I think it takes some experience along the way. It takes probably having had a few knocks along the way before you get here.

*Let's say, some real hard experiences.*
Some real hard experiences, and not just having had the experiences but having thought about them to extract some lessons from them—lessons in terms of what you did, what you didn't, do right in those situations, what new behaviors you've learned out of them, what lessons you've learned that can be applied in the future, and how you can recognize developing situations like that along the way.

*That's excellent.*
You've got to know who you are, though.

*On the flip side, when you look at it now, with all of this wealth of experience, what suggestions would you make to MIT to improve or enhance the experience of blacks like yourself?*
Well, there are some things that I think we can do, that we ought to be doing a better job of—to some extent I fault our faculty for this—and that's talking to one another. We used to do a lot more of that, as contentious as it used to be. I fault our faculty for not taking more of a lead in that. I think we, individually, those of us who are in a position to do so, have got to take people under our wings and develop them.

*Well, you've done that.*
That's been something I've insisted on doing at every step of the way.

*It shows.*
If you can't do it for a lot of people, then take one or two under your wing and be responsible for helping to guide their careers and helping them to develop themselves and helping them to keep some of the BS out of the way, away from them.

That's one thing, I think. I think the institution can do a much better job of trying to identify and recognize some of the young people of color here who have potential. I really don't see enough of that happening. The few people who do that—I think Culliton has done that, Joan Rice has done that, John Wynne has done that, Constantine has done that, Frank Perkins and the dean of the graduate school before Frank—Ken Wadleigh—did that. Then I'm really hard pressed to name any others. It's probably happened over in the humanities once or twice, or I think Ken Manning might not still be here. But that's about it. It takes someone who's willing to see a person of color who's got potential and some demonstrated skills, demonstrated capabilities, and move him along, give him an opportunity.

*That's excellent.*
The Institute doesn't do this systematically. I'm not sure it's done systematically for anybody, but if it happens it certainly happens much less for people of color than it does for anybody else.

*Is there any topic, any issue you would like to have on record so when somebody says this was Dr. Isaac Colbert, you would like for that to be inscribed under your name?*
That's a very interesting question. I guess if there are a few bullet points that ought to be under my name that I would like people to remember me for, it would be as someone who recognized the value in others and the potential in others and tried to do something to develop it. I guess I'd like to be remembered for my willingness to build breadth, do a hell of a lot of different things, and try to do them all very well.

*Yes, you have.*
I guess those are the two things, and as someone who has been trying to demonstrate to the largely white powers here that we're out there—we're out there and we can do it, if they just give people a chance. Those are the things I'd like to be remembered for.

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