Interview with Peter Balsam

Barnard College Professor

Conducted by Elizabeth Moye

March 11, 2015

E. Moye:

Okay. So, this is an interview with Peter Balsam. He’s a current Barnard professor in the psychology department; he was a professor who taught during the discussion and possibility of a merger, and I’m going to ask him some questions about that. Okay. So, I would love it if you would just start by telling me a little about your decision to join the faculty at Barnard, as well as describe to me your experience when you first started and what Barnard felt like to you at that time.

P. Balsam:

So, Barnard was my dream job. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

Wow.

P. Balsam

And the reason it was a dream job is that it was in New York, and I really wanted to be in New York. It was a great college, and I like teaching, and it was part of a terrific university—so that I was going to be in a community of scholars that, for what I was interested in, was really the best in the world. And, so, I was pretty blown away that I actually got the job. The other part of it that turned out to be true is that I get a lot of meaning out of being at an institution that has a mission, and Barnard’s mission of educating women is one that I resonated with, and it’s meant a lot to me. Even then it meant a lot. But I was just a kid when I got there. I had gone right to graduate school, and I was 25 years old when I started as an assistant professor. And because I was an assistant professor, I really wasn’t deeply involved in any discussions about merger, only knew they were going on, but was not directly involved myself in them. I listened to discussions of it, but I also didn’t feel like I had much to add to those discussions. I wasn’t at all afraid of a merger; in fact I was pretty sure that that’s what was going to happen—that a merger would take place, as it had at all the other Ivy League institutions, and that eventually the smaller school was absorbed into the larger school. And I was okay with that, and it seemed like it would work out okay. But it’s probably because I didn’t see—at least early on—I didn’t see how important it was for Barnard to be an all women’s college, to perform its mission.

E. Moye:

So, has your perspective on that changed over time?

P. Balsam:

Yeah. It didn’t take that long, but, when I first started, I don’t think I truly understood that.

E. Moye:

So, how did you feel when you got on campus—when you arrived here? I would love for you to tell me a little bit about how the school felt to you, what you felt like your relationships were with students, what you felt like your relationships were like with other faculty.

P. Balsam:

Well, I guess because I was so young, I felt much closer to a lot of students than I felt to some of the faculty who were considerably older—and I was closer in age to a lot of students. So I felt a good rapport with the students. I found the faculty to be very friendly. The faculty—there was some angst about the discussions that were going on, and I think the angst was highest among the assistant professors who were sort of the senior assistant professors and would be coming up for tenure in the next couple of years. I think they were most concerned because they felt like they were hired in one school, and they might wind up being considered for tenure in a very different school. And, so, I think that’s where there was a great deal of anxiety. Also, in retrospect, not something that I understood was that, if you look at what happened to the other schools that merged, you know any of the Ivy’s that merged with their sister college, is that the sister college, more or less, completely dissolved into the university structure, and so whatever the history was of that college, or whatever special kind of experience [brief pause] that the college created was lost. But I didn’t know that. I didn’t know that that would be the case. I didn’t know that in the beginning.

E. Moye:

Right. So, it would be great if you could tell me a little bit about what you did know about the merger, about what you did know the merger would mean for Barnard.

P. Balsam:

Well, I guess what I thought was that the departments would merge, that there’d be a unified set of requirements for the undergraduates in both colleges, that it would be [brief pause] a good experience for all—[laughs] is what I thought.

E. Moye:

Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about your understanding of Barnard’s relationship to Columbia at that time, before any discussion of the merger came up? How—or even during—I guess, when the merger came up, but how Barnard and Columbia related to each other.

P. Balsam:

Well I think that Columbia didn’t think much about Barnard. I think it was just there. It was good that it was there because if a woman wanted to get a Columbia education then she had to go to Barnard. And, in fact, there are a lot of Barnard graduates—alums—from that era, when you ask, if you just met them on the street and said: “where did you go to school?” They would say: “Columbia.” They actually wouldn’t say Barnard.

E. Moye:

That’s so interesting.

P. Balsam:

But that was part of the identity of it, I think, prior to the—whatever it was—’81 agreement?

E. Moye:

’82/’83. So, I guess that leads me to a question that I am curious about. About what, from your perspective as a faculty member, you would say how the “Barnard woman” felt about being a Barnard student. So, when you say someone from that era might say that they went to Columbia, I’m interested in that, because I think today we have such a strong identity as a “Barnard woman.” And I’m interested to see how that might have changed.

P. Balsam:

Yeah, no—I think it’s changed considerably. I think everyone was appreciative of Barnard, but there was nothing that you could compare yourself to as a Barnard student that would make you think you were different than any other Columbia student. So you had—maybe you had—some slightly different requirements, and you took some classes that were different, but you were, in a way, you were more fully integrated into the life of the University then. And now because there are two newspapers, and there are two radio stations, and there are two “whatevers”—I mean, maybe there were then—but you know other women who are having the same experience you’re having, but they really are having it at a different institution.

E. Moye:

Right. So, do you think that there’s a difference between the Barnard and Columbia experience, and where do you think those difference lie?

P. Balsam:

Absolutely. Well, I’ll say it first from the point of view of a faculty member.

E. Moye:

Yeah, please.

P. Balsam:

So, when someone applies to college—every college that you go to says that it’s very important that our faculty be good teachers and first-class researchers—and then you go there and you find that that balance is really different at different institutions. So if you go to a big research university, you find that mainly what’s important is doing research, and the TA’s do a lot of the interacting with the students in various ways. And if you go to a small liberal arts college then you have the full attention of the faculty—usually—and you can develop very close and personal relationships with them. But then you do also discover that they kind of, you know, they’re scholars, but they’re not so actively engaged in scholarship most of the time. And then you have Barnard. Which is almost unique—I think—in that the faculty that the students get to interact with, and this may be post-agreement, actually—I’ll come back to that—but I think that the faculty that the students interact with are first-rate scholars and devoted teachers, but not everyone, but most of them are working—you know they work hard on their research, they work hard on their teaching, and they strive to do both and to involve their students in all aspects of their professional life. I think that’s really pretty unique, and it’s pretty unique in higher education. I really didn’t see what it was like before the agreement, so I can’t say for sure about how that balance was. I had the impression that the balance at Barnard was more toward the small liberal-arts teaching type of a faculty, and that one of the effects of the agreement, possibly, was to shift that balance toward the middle. And, you know, I’m sure there are good parts and bad parts to that, but I think that may have been one of the effects.

E. Moye:

Sure. Okay.

P. Balsam:

And the reason that happens is because, with that agreement, the system by which faculty would get tenured requires an evaluation of their scholarship—both by Barnard and by Columbia.

E. Moye:

Okay. I’m curious when—from the time that you got here—when did you start hearing about the possibility of merging with Columbia? And where did that voice come from? So, was it from the administration that you heard about it? Was it from other faculty? Did you hear students talking about it?

P. Balsam:

I don’t think students talked about it. Well, I don’t think it was a topic of discussion, much with students—as least the ones I knew. But it was in faculty meetings, and mostly it was from the administration; at least my view of it, and again maybe it’s because I was new, is that it was a discussion that administrations were having and the trustees were having. It didn’t feel to me like it involved me very much—the discussion.

E. Moye

Okay. And what year did you come to Barnard? 19—?

P. Balsam:

1975-’76.

E. Moye:

Okay, so you were already quite a few years in when the discussion came up.

P. Balsam:

Yeah.

E. Moye

Okay. I would like to ask, you know, after you started hearing about the possibility of merging… It sounds like it didn’t seem to have that great of an impact on you. You don’t seem that you were fearful that you would lose your position, that there were going to be some kind of adverse effects. I’d love to know, you know, what the impact was for you.

P. Balsam:

It crossed my mind that I might lose my job.

E. Moye:

Okay.

P. Balsam:

I didn’t think that it would happen immediately. But I also didn’t know, you know, what opportunity it would present also. So, if the schools merged, maybe, my job would turn slightly different, but maybe there would be the resources to thrive in a new system, in a different way. Since I didn’t have security at Barnard, [laughs] not having security at a merged Barnard-Columbia wasn’t going to be too different.

E. Moye:

Okay.

P. Balsam:

Yeah.

E. Moye:

Could you tell me a little bit about your understanding of other faculty members’ feelings on the issue?

P. Balsam:

I think it was a big range. I think there was—particularly on the part of the older assistant professors—there was a lot of anxiety, but also on the part of some of the professors in departments that did not get along with their Columbia counterparts, I think there was also a lot of anxiety. Yeah, I just can’t imagine that would have worked out well. We still have those legacies. So, for example, the Barnard Biology Department and the Columbia Biology Department have completely different perspectives on what should be taught in biology. And, you know, I can’t imagine how, if those departments had merged, that there would have been a happy synthesis [laughs]. You know, on the other hand, you have departments that still are amazingly integrated—like math or anthropology—and I think it probably would have very little impact on those departments.

E. Moye:

How did you feel about the psychology department?

P. Balsam:

Psychology is in the middle. So, there’s a fair amount of collaboration between faculty across the departments and respect for each other, and it probably would have been somewhere in the middle.

E. Moye:

Sure. In your time at Barnard before the merger did you often teach Columbia students? Was there a high rate of cross-registration?

P. Balsam:

Nah, I think it was about the same.

E. Moye:

Okay. And how would you describe the students at this time? Both Barnard and Columbia.

P. Balsam:

[After a pause] I think it was a period of high social consciousness, with the students having a real sense of political responsibility, and, at the same time, it was a pretty intellectual time. So, you know, all the years I’ve been around I’ve seen it sort of go intellectual, and then it goes more career oriented, then it goes more intellectual. That was one of the intellectual times in the beginning, I think.

E. Moye:

What do you think brings on those different periods?

P. Balsam:

In part the economy. I think whenever there’s a downturn in the economy, within a couple of years, the students start becoming job oriented, and that lasts for a while. You know, it’s hard to predict all the cycles, but that’s probably a big input into it. I’m not sure what creates the times when people feel very strong social responsibility and commitments to social justice—I’m less clear about why that comes in and out.

E. Moye:

Well that actually leads me into something that I am very interested in for this project, which is the women’s movement at this time. So, yesterday, when I was discussing this period of time with Paula Franzese, she was discussing how her time at Barnard was kind of between second and third waves of feminism, and, you know, I’m interested to know if you think, from your perspective, the women’s movement had to do with Barnard students not wanting to merge with Columbia.

P. Balsam:

Oh. Interesting question. [After a pause] I think for some faculty that was true.

E. Moye:

Okay.

P. Balsam:

So, the faculty who understood the feminist perspective: I think they were very strong advocates of independence. But it was a time when academic feminism, I think, was really—again, you know, I don’t have a true—because I’m beginning my career then—but those were my first encounters with academic feminism, and they continued to grow from when I started. But I had the impression that academic feminism was only then beginning to be taken seriously, and at Barnard it was much more mainstream than it was at other institutions. So, yeah, I would say that was an influence on that discussion. I don’t know whether that was an influence on the administration. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

How did you feel about the administration’s stance on the issue?

P. Balsam:

Like I said—I mean I didn’t feel I was part of the discussion with the administration. Ellen Futter was the President—she was very young, she’s a lawyer—I’m sure she kept her cards very, you know, close. [Brief pause] You should talk to her—I mean, because I think she’s probably the one who has the most insight into what the forces were that moved them away from the merger—like where that deep understanding came from that Barnard should really try to keep it’s own identity. She’s just over at the museum. I’m serious.

E. Moye:

I really take that suggestion to heart—certainly. I’m going to continue this project actually beyond the limits of the project itself. This is the second-third of it, and I’m going to combine the second-third and the final-third, and bring it into a much larger project. So, I really will look into that—for sure.

P. Balsam:

Or, Professor McCaughey might have a much better understanding. He was much more senior and involved in administrative things too.

E. Moye:

Yeah. He was very interested to know about Paula Franzese’s perspective on the issue—that she didn’t really seem to have very much fear about it. So, let me just ask you, did you feel a negative sentiment about merging from the administration—that they didn’t want to merge?

P. Balsam:

No, I did not.

E. Moye:

You did not?

P. Balsam:

No, I didn’t. [Brief pause] I mean, yes toward the end of the negotiation, yeah. But early on it wasn’t clear to me. But I guess if I would have thought about it a little more deeply, I would wonder what the negotiation was. [Laughs] But, no—mostly I remember—the things I remember are Ellen Futter saying how she couldn’t talk about it. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

It seems like a lot of it went on behind closed doors. There didn’t seem to be a lot of—

P. Balsam:

Yeah, and I was not on that side of the door for sure. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

[Laughs] Okay. So, that is something that hasn’t been so clear to me in the research that I’ve done. It seems as though the conversation was going on, sort of, campus-wide. And it seems, from your perspective, that it wasn’t even discussed very openly.

P. Balsam:

No—I mean I think people had discussions, but I don’t know who had input into the actual thinking that went into the negotiation. That was not clear to me.

E. Moye:

Okay. And, you know, Professor Franzese was saying yesterday—Barnard students, from her perspective, really just didn’t think it would happen. They really did not think that we would merge; they really didn’t think that it was going to be an issue. So, did you get that sentiment from the students?

P. Balsam:

From the students? I did get the sentiment that there wasn’t a lot of concern. I really don’t know where that came from. Whether it came from: “well I’m almost out of here [laughs] and whatever happens.” Like I said, I think even the students who thought there would be a merger, I’m not sure that they were concerned. Because maybe the ones who thought it would never happen weren’t concerned because they thought it would never happen, and they wanted it that way. And the ones who thought, well if there’s a merger, then that’ll be okay too. I’m not sure. Yeah, I didn’t pick up a lot of agitation in the hearts of students about it.

E. Moye:

Okay. And did you think it would happen?

P. Balsam:

Oh. Okay. [After a pause] What did I think? [Another brief pause] Yeah, I did. And I was actually surprised when it didn’t happen. Because it had happened basically everywhere else, and I guess I wasn’t aware that there was strong—such deep opposition—to it. Not deep opposition, but such a strength of opposition. And yeah, I was kind of surprised when it didn’t happen.

E. Moye:

And why do you think it didn’t happen?

P. Balsam:

I want you to tell me, actually. [Laughs] I don’t know. Somewhere there were enough people in the trustees with a deep enough belief that Barnard did better as an independent institution. You know, I’d love to know who that was and what the discussion was about that. But, I think that’s why it didn’t happen: the trustees. I wonder if there are any still around?

E. Moye:

I wonder that too. I am very curious about whether or not—

P. Balsam:

You know who has been around a long time is Helene Kaplan. She may remember.

E. Moye:

Yeah! Did you feel that once Columbia went co-ed—

P. Balsam:

Yes, I thought Barnard would implode.

E. Moye:

You did?

P. Balsam:

I did. I thought that Barnard would start losing applicants to Columbia.

E. Moye:

It was very tricky for the following decade.

P. Balsam:

Well, I thought that most women would want to go to Columbia and would not want to go to Barnard. And I thought there was a very good chance that Barnard wouldn’t survive it.

E. Moye:

That’s so interesting. Did you feel that Barnard students began to have a different relationship with Columbia once they went co-ed?

P. Balsam:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. So, I think they began to feel less and less a part of the University. That they were, and some students, even now, I think, feel like they’re second class citizens of the University—that they’re looked down upon. Yeah. But that was not true before.

E. Moye:

So, what is that like as a faculty member? I mean, how do you feel when you see that some students feel that they’re second class citizens, or—

P. Balsam:

Well I try to always remind them how lucky they are. So, for example, I deal with a lot of neuroscience students, and, at Barnard, your senior experience is that you have to do a year-long research project. We have enough connections—and people love Barnard students—so they wind up doing this amazing project in some of the most advanced and best neurobiology laboratories in the world. So I just keep reminding them that this special blend of Barnard–which is this really unique combination of research and teaching—is giving them experiences and opportunities that most of the students on the other side of the street are not, and they should treasure it [laughs]—and if the students on the other side of the street don’t understand that, that’s okay. I mean, you know. But they shouldn’t take to heart, let’s say, a negative view a Columbia student might have about Barnard. They should understand that that’s not based in reality.

E. Moye:

So, before the merger, you think that Barnard students felt less like second-class citizens?

P. Balsam:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, no. I think they felt full citizenship in the University. They had their own little place that they went to and their activities and things, but there was no sense that they were excluded from the University as a whole.

E. Moye:

I’m curious as to whether or not—

P. Balsam:

In fact, it made it hard—something you said reminded me—one of the reasons that it was hard for Barnard to do fundraising is because, in fact, the alums felt a relationship to the University at least as much as they felt to Barnard.

E. Moye:

Wow. Well, I’m curious as to whether or not the relationship changing between Barnard and Columbia, and Barnard students beginning to feel this sense of second-class citizenship, had to do with the creation of this strong Barnard woman. If this feeling of being separate had any impact on wanting to become even more proud of our own school?

P. Balsam:

Of course. I mean I think in every group that gets marginalized, in whatever way they’re marginalized, that that enhances group identity. So I think that’s surely the case—that students’ identification with Barnard got stronger—and positive sides of it.

E. Moye:

Do you feel that you saw that taking shape?

P. Balsam:

Nah, it happened slowly. I didn’t see it happening. I bet students did. But, I didn’t. I bet students in that transition era—if you went like two years after the agreement or something. Yeah, the students that were maybe first-years the year of the agreement—something like that—they may have been aware of it even. I can’t even tell you when that happened—I just know that it did. At some point I went: “Oh.” [Laughs]

E. Moye:

So what—what are the differences—[Professor Balsam stands] do you want me to pause for a second?

P. Balsam:

No.

E. Moye:

What are the differences between the Barnard student when you started here and the Barnard student that you have today?

P. Balsam:

Woah! Okay. When I started they were all New Yorkers. Or greater metropolitan New York area students—and now they’re from—more from all over the place. Many of them were commuters. And now the College is completely residential. [After a pause] Something that’s always been true is that a very high percentage of students are second generation immigrants—the daughters of second generation immigrants—and that was true then, as it is now—it’s just which countries people are coming from has changed. [Brief pause] In the beginning, like I said, it was an intellectual era. Right? And I think now we’re in an achievement era.

E. Moye

Can you explain that achievement era a little bit?

P. Balsam:

[After a pause] I think that students—but it’s true of the whole culture, not just Barnard—that students get on a treadmill when they’re in high school and they try to amass a resume that’s going to get them into a good college, which involves high grades and extracurricular activities, and being busy basically every minute, and it’s kinda like being on this treadmill of achieving, and, unfortunately, I think a lot of students don’t get off it when they get to Barnard—that a lot of them stay on that.

E. Moye:

And what’s the difference between the intellectual era and the achievement era?

P. Balsam:

I think it was that people were willing to do things they would fail at. Now, of course, they would never fail miserably, right? But they would take on, you know, some crazy course, because it sounded interesting or they wanted to see if they could do it. Or someone like yourself, you know, might actually take a chemistry course—[both of us laugh]—and yeah, okay, maybe you got a C, but you knew some chemistry.

E. Moye:

[Jokingly] Thank God.

P. Balsam:

Yeah, but, very few students will do that now. I think that’s a big difference. Yeah.

E. Moye:

Well, my dad taught at Columbia, got his PhD there, and then taught there during the time of the merger. And, he has friends who were Barnard students and then went to graduate school at Columbia, and had very strong opinions about the merger. Interestingly, my dad is the reason that I came to Barnard. My parents were adamant that I become a Barnard student—not a Columbia student—not a Middlebury student, where they both went to college—but a Barnard student. So, I’m curious about how Barnard developed this nature—this very public presence on the Columbia campus after the merger?

P. Balsam:

I’m not sure what you mean by public presence.

E. Moye:

When my dad was teaching at Columbia, for example, he says the smartest students he had were Barnard students—the best students he had were always his Barnard students, and I think we really—well my predecessors I guess—really worked to make a name for themselves on this campus, and I’m just not sure if my understanding of that is accurate. I don’t know if you felt that the Barnard student was actively working to show that they could shine just as bright as the Columbia student.

P. Balsam:

I don’t think so.

E. Moye:

Okay.

P. Balsam:

Yeah. And I think depending on what people were teaching, right, it would attract different Barnard students. So I think there’s also the selection side. So I mean, what did your dad teach here?

E. Moye:

English.

P. Balsam:

So, it may be whatever courses he offered as advanced English courses, that may have attracted, you know, the best and the brightest. Right? But I think in other areas the students, were just as good as Columbia students, but I don’t think that they felt particularly motivated—it wasn’t because they felt particularly motivated to show they could do it. There may be a handful like that, but I don’t think that was a general sentiment.

E. Moye:

Okay.

P. Balsam:

I could be wrong. Don’t trust me on that one. [Laughs] That’s one I think students have to answer.

E. Moye:

Okay. I’m just, you know, I ask all these questions of the students, but I’m just really curious about what the faculty understanding of the students was at that time. Okay. So, one thing, you know, I mentioned to you earlier—actually before we started recording—was that in some of the research I’ve done there’s been a sense that Columbia was kind of a bully and was kind of going to coerce Barnard into this relationship—Barnard unwillingly going into it—and I wonder what—how you feel about that? If you feel Columbia was a bully, or how you felt about Columbia?

P. Balsam:

Well, may have been. Columbia had to admit women. Columbia didn’t have a choice.

E. Moye:

Why?

P. Balsam:

Because all the other Ivy’s had doubled the size of their admission pool by admitting women, and so they were much more selective in who they were admitting, and, so, Columbia wanted to be as selective as every other Ivy institution, and in that sense they had no choice. Their two options were to get the women by merging with Barnard, or just going on their own. I think the easier thing for them, and the more desirable thing for them was to do the merger, because you get more real estate and you get all these smart students who are already there and you just figure out the rest. So, I would guess that that’s what—again, I wasn’t in the room—but I would see why that’s what they would push for. I don’t know about bullying, I mean, it was probably pretty hard-nosed, yeah.

E. Moye:

And how did you personally feel as a Barnard professor in a relationship with Columbia? Did you feel—

P. Balsam:

Oh I felt fine. I mean I taught Columbia graduate courses. I had great colleagues at Columbia. I felt like I belonged—I was a member of the community. It was a little frustrating not to have all the resources my Columbia colleagues had. They had a lot more resources and did less teaching, and that was at times frustrating. [Laughs]

E. Moye:

Did you get a sense, at all, for their perspective on merging?

P. Balsam:

I think most of them didn’t think about it.

E. Moye:

Really?

P. Balsam:

Yeah. At least the ones I was interacting with. I think they understood the need to admit women and that it was going to happen one way or the other, and I think they didn’t see it as being extremely impactful one way or the other way.

E. Moye:

So, in the research I’ve done, I’ve found a sense that Columbia administration, faculty—in mostly the faculty—there was a feeling like they would rather go co-ed unilaterally than merge with Barnard. Do you have any—

P. Balsam:

Well it was probably department by department, and it was also probably depended on how many tenured faculty were in the Barnard department. So, I think the standards for scholarship were different, and there probably were departments that did not want to have a lot of less productive scholars in their department as the result of a merger. That’s just a guess.

E. Moye:

Yeah. I just want your perspective! A lot of discussion—which seems, actually, kind of strange to me—is that so much of the relationship with Barnard was about how Barnard tenured faculty. So, Columbia wanted to have, kind of, the power over Barnard to decide which faculty members could become tenured. And I’m curious if you can give me a little bit of insight, or just your own perspective, on why that would be?

P. Balsam:

Because that’s the most important thing that a college or university does, and who gets tenured defines the whole texture of the institution. So, depending on what your criteria are, like we were saying earlier, you wind up with institutions that are very focused on teaching, or you wind up with institutions that are very focused on research, or you wind up with “weird” Barnard. [Laughs] But who you tenure is everything in creating the—really—the identity of the institution.

E. Moye:

And so why did Barnard resist that?

P. Balsam:

[After a pause] I think there was a history of tenuring with a very big weighting toward the teaching, and it would change things. Yeah. And I think, you know—and again I don’t know for sure—but maybe there were also faculty who were tenured who realized that if the criteria for tenure changed then they might not be as appreciated as they had been.

E. Moye:

Did you feel a sense of appreciation being a Barnard faculty member?

P. Balsam:

From?

E. Moye:

From the administration, from the students, from the general atmosphere? I think because of the emphasis on the undergraduate education, I feel that Barnard, as a whole, as a feeling—Barnard as a feeling—really values its faculty members, and I wonder if the faculty members themselves feel valued?

P. Balsam:

Very infrequently—is what I think. I’m not sure why. [After a pause] Maybe it’s because Barnard is always financially stressed, so there’s always something that you have to do less with. So, maybe that’s the reason. I’m not sure.

E. Moye:

Did you have a sense of the financial stress at that time? I mean, part of the problem for Columbia, at least, was that they didn’t have enough resources to continue accepting that number of students—that they needed to have more students—they needed more for everything. Did you get a sense of that?

P. Balsam:

[After a pause] No, I wasn’t really aware—I guess—of the financial stresses other than Barnard was poor.

E. Moye:

[Both laugh] Always has been, always will be. So would that have had an impact on whether or not Barnard would have merged.

P. Balsam:

Well, surely if Barnard couldn’t sustain itself as an independent institution it would have merged.

E. Moye:

And for some reason Barnard really felt like—

P. Balsam:

Like it could.

E. Moye:

And why do you think that is?

P. Balsam:

[After a pause] Honestly, I don’t know. I really don’t know the answer to that question.

E. Moye:

Okay. There is always an overwhelming feeling that Barnard will survive. And, as a Barnard student, I often, actually, worry that when I have children or when I’m older, I’ll say: “I went to Barnard,” and my children will say: “What’s Barnard?” Because it will no longer exist. I fear that women’s education will become seen as unnecessary, and I wonder how you feel about that?

P. Balsam:

Yeah, no. I have the same concern. Until you experience it, and the positive benefits of it, you don’t really think its necessary. And maybe there will be a point at which it’s not. I mean it would be great if there’s a point at which it’s objectively not necessary—but there’ll be a point, maybe, at which there aren’t enough people who understand that there’s a real benefit to, you know, a lot of young women—but it could happen.

E. Moye:

So what are the benefits?

P. Balsam:

Well—I think what I was saying—they’re the level of contact with the faculty, but they’re also the opportunities to be—there’s a lot that’s expected of you as a Barnard student. The faculty have very high standards, and they involve the students in pretty high-level stuff and push them to do high level things. And I just think you also take away the distractions that—in co-ed classes there’s a tendency of men to dominate those classes—and it just gives the Barnard women more opportunity to express themselves, and to try things, and to be successful. And maybe even the most important thing is to feel comfortable with their own intellect, and with their own ideas, and to come to believe in their own ability to create things. I would say if there’s one thing every department at Barnard tries to do it’s to teach its students to create. And that means different things in different disciplines, but it’s that the Barnard student becomes a producer of knowledge, you know, a producer of things, but a producer of knowledge, and it’s a great gift to give to someone. And I think by being in a single-sex institution that the comfort level with that is created for more students—that that’s who they are rather than defining themselves with respect to others.

E. Moye:

Okay, so we have about 15 or 20 minutes left.

P. Balsam:

I’m actually going to have to quit pretty soon.

E. Moye:

Oh okay. I’m just curious—

P. Balsam:

But we could continue another time if you want to.

E. Moye:

Okay, that’s totally fine. I think we can wrap up fairly quickly. I’m curious about when the merger didn’t happen, so when Barnard decided it was going to be on its own, what was the feeling on campus?

P. Balsam:

Well there was a lot of relief, for sure on the part of a lot of faculty, I think; you could hear at the faculty meeting, when it was announced, it was a collective sigh of relief in the room. That was the general reaction, I think: relief and—still uncertainty about how that was going to play out. Right? So, I think a lot of people—like I mentioned earlier myself—weren’t sure what was going to happen to Barnard’s credibility as an institution. Whether students would continue to apply to Barnard? Or whether they would only see it as a backdoor to Columbia? That would also be a way in which the College would disappear. Right.

E. Moye:

So, did you see a decrease in students coming to Barnard?

P. Balsam:

No. What always amazed me is that the—you’d have to go back—I bet you could get data on it to see whether or not test scores went down—I don’t know the answer to that—but if they went down, they didn’t go down that much—probably because there were always more than enough good students who applied to Barnard that it wasn’t going to have a huge impact on the selectivity. But, what always amazed me was that, pretty much, I think from very early on, after the agreement, was every year there were only about 50 students who were admitted to both schools, [laughs] and almost all of them would go to Columbia—the dual-admits. So, whoever was applying to Barnard, and was qualified to come to Barnard, they were not also applying to Columbia, most of them. That somehow a message got out that for that particular student this was an appealing place. It’s kinda interesting.

E. Moye:

Okay.

P. Balsam:

Maybe they were all the daughters of alums.

E. Moye:

Yeah! [Both laugh] No choice. If I could just ask you two final questions? First, it seems that you didn’t have strong feelings about—not strongly opposed, not strongly in favor of merging—but I guess I would really like, you know, to know where your feelings came from. Why you didn’t have such an adamant belief about it? And I know part of what you’ve been talking about is the idea that it would happen, or that it happened everywhere else—

P. Balsam:

Oh, well. Right. That is it happened—the mergers. But I also didn’t understand, as deeply as I do now, that the kind of education that would take place at a liberal arts college, that was co-ed, would disadvantage women to the extent that it did. I didn’t really know that in my heart.

E. Moye:

Sure.

P. Balsam:

So I thought, well if it goes co-ed, I’ll teach the way I teach and guys could benefit from it too. [Laughs] Well, you know, but I didn’t see that it would be very costly to the young women. That’s why. Yeah.

E. Moye:

And that has changed?

P. Balsam:

My feeling about it’s changed, yeah.

E. Moye:

Okay. And finally, I would just like to ask you—well I’d like to thank you so much for spending this time with me—but also I would like to just get a brief feeling from you about how you feel the current relationship between Barnard and Columbia is?

P. Balsam:

[After a pause] I think it’s in a pretty “okay” phase, in the sense that I think the relationship allows Barnard to be pretty much whatever Barnard wants to be. So I think that’s a good part. I think it’s mostly ignored by Columbia. So I think it’s not a big focus of attention on the part of Columbia. You know, I’d always hoped that maybe someday Columbia would see Barnard as one of the jewels in its crown—just a different jewel than some of the other jewels. [Laughs] But I don’t think that that’s the general sentiment that comes from Columbia. But they’re fine. I mean they’re not rejecting Barnard, they’re not unhappy with Barnard, they see some of the benefits of having Barnard around. But, yeah, I think it’s just not a big deal to them.

E. Moye:

Sure. That reminds me of one more thing—if it’s okay if I ask you?

P. Balsam:

Sure.

E. Moye:

Barnard is so focused on undergraduate education, and Columbia, historically, at least my perception, is that they’re much more focused on their graduate schools. I think that that’s one reason Barnard really didn’t want to be subsumed by the larger University. Would you agree with that? Or would you have a different feeling?

P. Balsam:

Oh, yeah, totally. Yeah. I mean Barnard’s identity was as an undergraduate institution; Columbia’s was a graduate. Yeah, and it wouldn’t be such a good fit. Yeah.

E. Moye:

Okay. Great! Well this was so great, thank you so much.

P. Balsam:

You’re welcome. I can’t wait to see the product! You will invite me?