INTERVIEW WITH
ROB FREUND
June 14, 2012
Sloan Oral History Series

B: Bob McKersie
G: George Roth
R: Rob Freund

G: It is June 14, 2012, and this is George Roth with Bob McKersie interviewing Rob Freund for the oral history project.

B: Let's start with when you came here, and what were the circumstances that pulled you to MIT?

R: The circumstances were unusual. I'm going to work back from my first faculty meeting, because that's a very interesting starting point.

I wrote a letter; I got an interview; I got the job. Very unusual, as you'll find out, shortly, how that all came about. I attended my first faculty meeting here thinking that this would be an important occasion. Abe Siegel announced 12 new faculty, the biggest class ever of people to start in a single year, and he said, "In fact, we got our first choice on everyone but one." I knew who that one was; I was the OR group's second choice. I didn't feel bad; I felt very fortunate to be here.

The first person they offered the position to was Robin Roundy, who turned them down to go to Cornell, because he's a devout Mormon and Ithaca was going to be a better family environment. I was very grateful that Robin turned them down – he didn't turn them down because he thought less of the school. It is just the opposite, actually. Robin is a great guy. I had never met him, but when I did meet him, he and I just hit it off.

So, all this is to say that things that might be awkward wound up being wonderful. I wound up here because, unlike just about everyone else that year, that group of 12 –

G: What year?

R: 1983. I got my Ph.D. in 1980, and had what I thought was going to be one of those two roads that diverge in a narrow wood, and you couldn't go back and revisit. I had a choice of either going into industry and policy or going into academia with my Ph.D., because my Ph.D. was very theoretical. I had a strong interest in energy and environmental economics and I was doing all this modeling work while at Stanford.

I chose to go to a consulting firm in Washington thinking I would never be able to get an academic job in the future, or at least if I did, it would never be at a top place. Then three years later, I realized I was not happy in my consulting career. I looked around to figure out what I wanted to be doing, and I realized I just missed doing research. I also thought to myself, "If I can't get to a top school, it's not going to be worth it."

I hadn't seen or spoken with my former advisor in three years. This was not yet the Internet age. I thought, "Let me talk to a classmate who went on to academia, and find out how you do this." So I contacted Jim Orlin, who was here. He told me, "You've got to put together this thing called a CV." I knew nothing, and was doing this out of time and out of place. But he told me how the game worked. I contacted my advisor and asked him to write a letter, and all this other stuff. Jim said, "I think we're going to be interviewing at MIT." And since Jim knew me very well, I thought, "It's going to be hard for me to get an interview. They're not going to believe me, coming from industry." But Jim knew when we were both doctoral students, and he said, "I always knew you were an academic." He said, "We will interview you."

I called all these other places, after writing them letters, and said, "I'm scheduling my interviews. I have an interview at MIT." Then I think they gave me another look. In the end, it all came down to Harvard Business School versus Sloan, after Robin Roundy turned all these schools down. All these schools were telling me, "If you have an offer, take it," because they all thought Robin Roundy was their top candidate. They had all made him an offer, and were waiting for him to say yes. Then he decided to go to Cornell, where I had not applied, because I didn't want to live in Ithaca.

B: You had been a student of Jim's at –

R: No. I had been a classmate of Jim's at Stanford.

B: He preceded you here. He was here, already.

R: He preceded me. He was already in his fourth year. So I interviewed. They told me, "If you have another job, take it." I waited, and all of a sudden, they offered it to me. I had to decide between HBS and Sloan. There was really no decision. I was quite concerned about the culture at Harvard. I had a friend at Harvard named Andre [Perold], and a good acquaintance here, Jim, and I had talked to Tom Magnanti over the phone. I was trying to decide, so I called both places to ask a bunch of style-of-life questions: "What do you do at lunch?" Not, "Would you support this kind of research?" It was more like, "What happens at lunch time around here?" And then I posed the same question …

B: That's a great question.

R: … at each… Well, here's the other question I posed. You have to go back in time. This is 1983. The Iron Curtain hasn't fallen yet. I said both to Andre [Perold] and then in a separate conversation with Tom Magnanti, "Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I'm a communist," which is sort of true, in a way. I said, "How is that going to go down at your school?"

Andre said, "You're entitled to your own politics." He said, "People have very different political persuasions here. But, you're probably not going to find a whole lot of support for that around here." He was honest. It was like, "Well, that's a little strange for HBS. But we want you anyway."

Tom's reaction was essentially, "What is communism? And why are you even asking this?" As if this was not a relevant thing at all. "It might have been, 'Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and my favorite color is orange', who cares?" This was before all the political polarization that's happened in our country, of course.

G: I'm guessing some of this is because of having spent the time in Washington in the consulting organization and realizing you were very clear on what you were looking for in terms of an environment to work and do your research.

R: I wanted a research-oriented environment, right. A week before I came here, the consulting firm I had been working for recommended to the Natural Resources Defense Council, that they hire me to present some testimony to Congress about how coal reserves are viewed economically, and how they're bid on. How to value coal reserves in the western US. Because I had been doing this, I thought to myself, "This is going to be a horrible way to start at Sloan. I'm going to show up here, and I'm going to be distracted by having to prepare all this testimony." And I'd never testified before. I was blown away by the opportunity, but I thought, "These guys will think I'm still a consultant." And then the whole thing evaporated.

On the one hand I was disappointed because I wanted to be able to show off, both to friends, and to myself, that I had actually testified to Congress. Wouldn't that awesome? I've still never done that. But I was so relieved in terms of starting on the right foot, here, as a research- driven individual.

I was just going to read to you. I couldn't figure out all the other 12, all the other 11. But I think they are –

B: This is the class of 1983.

R: The entering class of 1983 I think it was. I know there was Dave Anderson.

B: He was in OSG.

R: That's right. Paul Healy, Charlie Fine, me, Tom Malone, John Carroll, Max Bazerman, and Chi-fu Huang. John Parsons, and three other people, who I'm not sure.

B: It's a good class. Quite a few of them are here. And John, I see once in awhile. He's doing something else, elsewhere at MIT.

R: John is involved in the energy initiative. He left here. But he was a left-wing economist. He was doing all this left-oriented finance or economics, I forget which. But a lot of things were not working for him here. So he left. Went to Baruch College or somewhere in New York City, and then came back here.

B: Well that's good to have that rundown of the Class of 1983.
We like to ask: did you go into E53 right away? Or where did you go?

R: Yes. My office was in E53. Who was in the suite? Jim Orlin, who had been a classmate of mine at Stanford. JoAnne Yates, because no one knew – she was not faculty.

B: Oh, that's right.

R: She was a lecturer. They just put her where they could put her.

Harlan Meal. Harlan and I hit it off. We used to play bridge. Often we would get together a bridge game at lunch that would involve John Parsons, Charlie, Paul Healy, myself, and Harlan, and some subset of those five.

G: Charlie?

R: Charlie Fine.

G: OK. That's who I thought you meant. So he was here when you were here?

R: Yes. He started with me, six months earlier, in January of 1983. He was on the list.

Tom Magnanti was our group head and the area head. He was an amazing mentor. I think he and I developed a special bond over the fact that I absorbed all his stuff very easily. He and I were very much in sync. I would ask him to look at my lectures. With others, you often had to twist their arm. Tom said, "Maybe I should look at this stuff, if you've never taught before," or putting together a syllabus, or whatever. Tom loved the fact that I wanted to go to him. But also, I think he could tell I had good intuition on teaching, so I was an easy mentee. He could get right to the frontier with me pretty quickly.

My third year here, Tom Malone won a junior faculty career development chair, I think only the second such chair the school ever had as a junior chair. I congratulated Tom Malone afterward, and said, "I could not imagine in my wildest dreams being in this situation." And a year later, I think through Tom's efforts, I was awarded the next career development chair. Paul Healy and Charlie Fine took me out to dinner that night. When I told this to Tom Magnanti, I would say the equivalent of tears came to his eyes, the notion that this group of faculty was not competing. They wanted to celebrate with me, as opposed to, "Oh, man. How come I didn't win this?" or "How can I ..." We were all very close, very supportive of one another.

In those days, the junior faculty, like Max and his wife, Marla, and others, we would organize these junior faculty ski weekends or ski vacations, and they became a tradition that lasted about five or six years. Then we all started to do separate things.

B: There is a camaraderie that develops amongst junior faculty, because you're all wondering whether you're going to get tenure. You're all new and trying to fit in, so there's a bonding process.

G: A good question would be whether that still occurs today.

R: I don't know. It's bigger, but I think the need for it is greater than ever. It was hard for me to imagine at the time how it might feel having been hired into some industrial engineering or applied math department where I'm the only person there of my age and not feel a sense of community at work. I felt an enormous sense of community at work.

G: It was interesting to hear about your bridge games. I look back in my work career, which started in the early 1980s, and I used to play backgammon at lunch. But I don't know of anyplace I go where I see people gathering and doing something frivolous. It was a way to talk about stuff when you weren't really doing real work. But nowadays it's a meeting and you get lunch, but it's not just hanging out. I don't know if that happens any more.

R: I don't know. We had the Faculty Club; there weren't that many lunch options. One thing that was never an option – maybe it didn't even exist – was the Refresher Course. Either you went to the F&T, or to the Faculty Club, or there was this place out where Au Bon Pain is that was called Alexander's or something. It was just horrible—as if the F&T wasn't. But the F&T was its own thing. But without e-mail, it was different.

I remember Charlie once called me on a Friday morning during IAP, and it had just snowed, and he said, "You want to go cross country skiing?"

I said, "Well, shoot. I've got a lot of work to do."

He said, "Come on. This is why we became faculty, right?"

I thought, "Hot damn. Yeah."

He got together a small group. We all went cross-country skiing. What other jobs could you do that?

G: One question is about the Operations Research Center. Did you have a center where you interacted with people as well?

R: Yes. There was the ORC. If you're in the OR group at Sloan, you really had two homes. There was your educational home, which is Sloan, and to a certain extent, your intellectual home, which was the OR Center. That was a great place, too. One way I characterized it was that the OR Center was this amazing program with an amazing collection of faculty, an amazing group of students, always. But it was very fragile because it didn't own its faculty; it didn't own its courses. It just was a shell and an admissions process, basically. All the faculty appointments were elsewhere. They were just doing this on their own time, perhaps despite the resentment of their department chair.

In the OR Center, in order for the program to work, you had to check your own agenda at the door. You might be an applied person, but you had to want to support all the theory people there. Or just the opposite.

G: When did it start? What was it like when you came there?

R: The ORC apparently started in 1953. Its first doctoral student was John Little, who started as a physics student. According to legend, probably the first OR degree given in the United States was John's.

I don't know what it was like before I got there. But when I got there, the two co-directors were Jerry Shapiro and Dick Larson, who were both pretty intense, who could butt heads, but would also work just for the good of the center. It was a great place, and still is. Fantastic students. A very collegial place. One thing it did have was desks for every student. So faculty didn't sit there; students all sat there. The students formed a physical community.

B: Would the faculty today have space in the OR Center?

R: No. There is just space for the co-directors.

B: A lot of intellectual activity. Weekly seminars and –

R: Weekly seminars and informal stuff going on. It was nice to have my office in E53 because I could easily go there, or my Ph.D. students could easily come talk to me.

B: It was in E40 –

R: Yes. Apparently, they had recently moved there when I arrived in 1983. I don't even know. Maybe 1980, '81, or something. They had been in Building 20 or something.

B: Right. Thinking about OR and applied math, how do you describe MIT in the math department and someone like yourself with a strong background in math? What's the community here, or lack of community?

R: This is much more of an issue now, believe it or not, than it was when I started here. When I got here, the culture at Sloan was … I think the importance of us being players with the other top schools and having our faculty appear in *Business Week*, and all this stuff about having us look and feel like management faculty, wasn't as much there. The faculty in our group were Jerry Shapiro, Jim Orlin, Tom Magnanti, all of whom were, by OR standards, very theory-oriented and worked primarily in the area of optimization, which is exactly what I was doing. We'd have discussions: "Do we really want to hire someone with that portfolio?" which was our portfolio. Not that we're being hypocritical or inconsistent, but the world has changed, our role has changed, our field has changed. So it's very relevant now.

I remember when I came up for my first reappointment review, having come from consulting – I was actually looking forward to teaching the MBAs, and both Tom and Jim reminded me, "You don't want to look forward to teaching these people. We teach a course they hate, which doesn't work," da, da, da. I thought, "I don't believe that model. I know these folks. I worked with them for three years. I'm going to rebuild this course and it's going to work. There's no reason why it shouldn't." And I did that.

I'm not trying to boast, but I remember Tom telling me, after my first reappointment: "I mentioned at the committee meeting, I said, 'This guy can teach MBAs and he can publish in *Mathematics of OR,*'" which is this top theoretical journal. He said, "What more do you want, at this stage?"

I'm guessing, in those days, there wasn't any discussion of, "Well, are these two separate tracks he's doing? Where's the synergy?" These days that's a very important question to ask, because we are a mainstream business school now. We can still answer it, but we have to ask… I don't think it was even asked then. I'll never know. But surely no one was suggesting that I ask myself that.

B: That's very interesting. If you hadn't had the three years of consulting experience – was that the experience that made you ready to tackle our students?

R: I think so. I would not have had the confidence.

I don't want to toot my own horn, but I'm proud of a couple of things. One is that I marched in to talk to MBAs, and I felt completely confident, and completely at home, like, "I know you all. I've been working with you all for the last three years." Also, I know how important the stuff I'm teaching actually is, as opposed to I'm just supposed to say it because other people tell me that it's supposed to be important, even though I don't actually do it and use it. I just do research on it. So that was a natural environment for me.

But, research-wise, I thought, "Why do I really want to be at a business school? Why don't I just want to be in an applied math department?" Teaching-wise, I thought, "These are the kind of people I want to teach. I want to teach operations research, and I want to teach it to the people who are going to propel the field forward tomorrow through use." I had been doing OR successfully for three years, unlike any of my colleagues.

B: This is an area you really can shed light on, because you've won teaching awards. One of the themes that's coming out of George's discussions with Cathy is pedagogy. Has anybody ever asked you, "What is it that made your courses so successful, and you so successful, in an area that is traditionally very hard?"

You told us that Harvard Business School had stumbled in terms of getting a course together that gets students saying, "Hey. This is really great stuff!" What did you do that might be replicable in other subject areas?

R: I'm tempted to take all the credit, but I can't. There were several things. One was Tom Magnanti who was, from the outset, very supportive. Senior faculty weren't necessarily all that interested in encouraging their junior faculty to become excellent teachers.

B: They saw it as a tradeoff, right?

R: They saw it as a tradeoff. When I came here, I had one advantage that the other 11 of us didn't have, which was: to me this was an experiment. This was not a career commitment to be an academic. I thought, "I think I will enjoy this. I think it would be good for me." But I went into it with a sense of, "I'm going to have my own rules. And if they don't work, I'll pay the consequences, and do something else with my career."

But I hated this notion of a tradeoff, like you're either going to do good research or good teaching. I thought, "That's just morally no fun." I thought, "Let's do both."

There's no reason why you can't do a great job in research, and a great job in teaching. Tom was very supportive of that, especially as he saw that the investment in teaching was not at the expense of research.

The other is—and here's a confession to make. You remember the old core. What we now call Data Models and Decisions, DMD, there was this course called Decision Support Systems III, which Jim Orlin struggled with, and Jerry Shapiro struggled with. Tom wasn't teaching it any more. When I took it over, I revised the curriculum a lot. And I happen to have excellent teaching capability (which is not the same necessarily as good education capability), so I got very good ratings. I think that made it palatable to everybody, because to me, there is a huge difference between getting good ratings and producing a good course. They may be correlated, but they can be very different. When I look back at that curriculum for DSS-III I think, "That course thrived because I knew how to get those students to be happy, not because the curriculum was so great." But then, two-thirds of that course was on optimization, which is ludicrous. Requiring all MBA students to have 18 lectures on optimization methods just doesn't cut it. So you better be an amazing teacher.

When they mandated the new core, I had to work with Larry Wein, and Arnie Barnett, and others, and we came up with a course that would cover all the broad issues in management science. That's when I had to say, "Let's leave this other thing behind." I know I can deliver material well. The question is, let's get the material really right. I would say it was mostly Larry and me. Larry said, "Here's what students really need to learn. Here's what's really important. Here's how." He and I worked together, and we taught DMD its first year. There were only two sections, and it went pretty well. But I could tell Larry and I had this same philosophy which is: "this stuff is really important, and properly developed, it will teach itself. This is the age for this material."

And then, it's a matter of lecture design and delivery. But we finally got the material that should work almost independent of the lecturer. And then Vien Nguyen, and then Dimitris Bertsimas, and then Georgia Perakis, and then Yashan Wang, and then Gordon Kaufman all were able to successfully teach the course. I've been probably the magnet for it all. But that course has been about what I would call positive OR, or positive management science, which is, "don't apologize for it, and don't oversell it. Let people see its great value."

B: And you do that with really pertinent… what? Applications?

R: It's thought through very deeply, even though it may not look like it. In fact, we don't sell the course until the last lecture. In the first lecture we don't go, "Here's why you're in here. Here's why…," because no one's going to buy that at the outset. We do that in the last lecture and say, "Here's what you've learned, and here's its value. And you now know that."

One is, keep it relevant. So, the latest applications. For example, we're revising the curriculum now in the following way. Now we're doing two lectures on Google. The first lecture is on how Google's search engine works, which is called a Markov chain, and it's called the stationary distribution of a Markov chain. Its basic probability theory applied very cleverly. They've got a great product, thanks to good knowledge of probability and probabilistic systems. How are they going to make money with it? That's Google Ad Words, which is an optimization model. They solve zillions of optimization models every day to figure out who's going to be placed in which position for which search queries. We do one at the start of the course, and we do one at the end of the course. In other words, that's the latest innovation. But, always trying to keep it relevant.

Then some practical things that I don't necessarily believe in philosophically but are practical. For instance, we don't teach stuff that people don't actually do. What do I mean by that? For instance, in the old course we used to teach game theory—two-person zero-sum games. Those are great concepts, but people don't build two-person, zero-sum game models. It's a great conceptual tool. That was a political or practical decision—that we're going to have this course be stuff that is a practitioner-oriented thing. Also, what concepts and tools are we going to illustrate? What do we want people to know five years later? Things like that. Maybe I'm giving you too much.

B: No, no.

R: In other words, it's very deliberate in terms of why are we teaching this if we know people are going to forget it? They may like it. But I really tried to stay away from designing a course in terms of what students will like. That is a very shallow aspiration.

Student evals are just that. They are the student evals. I could be critical of them because I have no bitterness. I do well in these things.

G: How do you know what people do and don't do in the field?

R: One is to hope you have good intuition. You go to conferences and listen. Again, my research has been very theory-oriented, but my teaching has been very practice-oriented. I love going to talks about practice.

G: And you had that experience before you came here for those three years. But that gets old pretty quickly.

R: It got old pretty quickly. That's right.

G: So, it's your intuition and what you hear from conferences and –

R: Intuition and not only what I hear at conferences, but also just talking to my neighbors, talking to people in the world, keeping your eyes and ears open, or reading the newspaper. And I hope I have it right. Am I enmeshed in the world of practice? No. Could I be? Yes. I choose not to, for my own interests.

G: And the culture here supports that. Or is it your own standards? I've heard a lot about your own standards, here, being brought in, where the culture is ambivalent.

R: Yeah. I would say when I first started the culture seemed decisively oriented toward "get your teaching done, but do great research, and the more theoretical, the more eyebrows will be raised." That was convenient for me because that's what I wanted to do anyway. I did not take this tack of I have to figure out what the culture is here. I never had a tenure strategy, and I try and discourage people from having a tenure strategy, although, probably at the very end I did. You just get too caught up in it.

These days, things are different. When we're hiring faculty, now, in our group, we've got to figure out immediately, can they do well with MBAs? And will they move our curriculum forward, eventually, in our service courses, regardless of what their research is on? That's a very important criterion for us now, because we now teach ten sections of DMD a year—six to the regular MBA program, two Sloan Fellows, and two EMBA. So it's become a bigger fraction of what we do—"we" meaning OR and Statistics, and to a certain extent the Operations Management Group. Am I getting away from…?

B: No, no, no. This is great. One thing we've heard from some other people: with the growth of the student body and with the point system, people are doing much more time in the required courses and not having much capacity to offer specialized seminars that would interest them, and a subset of students.

R: Yeah. I feel it's funny. When I entered the Dean's Office, I thought, "I will wait a year until I've established respect, and then I will dismantle this damn points system." But I actually grew to appreciate it as a point system. Anything you have is going to be some version of a point system. But I feel different groups have treated the point system different ways. If you look at, say, Finance or Accounting, and maybe even Econ, they're firmly rooted in "let's optimize our points. Let's make our courses big. If we can attract a big enough audience, you can do one prep, two sections. You're teaching for one semester, and you're done." Then they have a ton of time for research and their other tasks.

G: And apparently more support than they had in the past, in terms of having to raise outside support. Is that true?

R: That's also true. But that's not from the point system.

G: The overall way the funding has come now, it's less important to raise outside funding.

R: That's true. I would contrast that, say, with the OR and Stats group, where our group tends to hate the point system; it's like taxes. You hate taxes, and you feel that unlike everyone else, you're paying more than your fair share. But we have said, given this point system, we're going to wind up teaching more than if we optimize, because we want to offer more specialized courses. So we offer a lot of smaller courses, and more Ph.D. courses than we get allotted, and we suffer for it. "Suffer" in quotes. We do more teaching than one semester, one prep, two sections. But that's just a choice. So I have no problem with the point system.

Sometimes people in my group will say, "Look what's going on in Finance or Accounting."

I'll go, "Well, you could do that if you wanted. So, go ahead."

"Then I can't offer my doctoral course."

"Well, yeah. Guess what? You can't, then."

B: In Economics, they don't have the same cadre of Ph.D. students, given the Economics Department here. There's a kind of an interesting tradeoff.

R: They could.

B: You have quite a cluster of Ph.D. students.

R: That's right. We have a cluster of Ph.D. students we serve. But, for our Ph.D. courses, we get healthy enrollments from the OR Center, also from the EECS, also from AeroAstro, also from Mechanical Engineering, and now occasionally, from Math. My doctoral course that I taught this spring? By the time people dropped, I had 36 students.

B: That's amazing for a Ph.D.

R: It's not because of a great teacher. It's just because the material is relevant across campus. We can offer doctoral courses and we'll suffer in terms of points. But we won't suffer in terms of intellectual engagement. In Marketing or Organizational Studies, if you offer doctoral courses more than you're allotted, you're going to get four students and you're going to get 15 points. Then it's a little bit of pedagogical suicide.

B: Shifting quite a bit. One thing that you did early in your career was to enroll as a member of the Senior Executive Program. Amazing thing you did. We need to put that one into the record because you weren't there teaching. You were there as a colleague of these guys.

R: All right. Here's another deep confession. Jim Orlin did it several years earlier. I remember, at the end, Jim shows up, and he's got all these little gifts of calendars, and I'm thinking, "Man, I want some of these things." What is that stuff called? Swag. So each of these guys gets their company to give some swag. But Jim did it after he got tenure. I thought, "Okay. I've got tenure. I really should get to know the school." But it wasn't as easy a sell. I think I now understand why. I think perhaps Jim didn't put the level of focus into it, or the school didn't see the benefits they were anticipating because Jim never got fully engaged with our MBA program. I did that. It was a very interesting thing.

B: Did you actually live out there?

R: I lived out there during the week. Eight or nine, I think it was nine weeks. I lived out there with these guys and three or four ladies in the program. Sociologically, it was an interesting experience, especially how the culture of this group devolved into almost like they were in high school again. But I learned a lot from them. And I was surprised at my lack of tolerance for wanting to actually read all the cases and the text, do all the work I was supposed to do mentally, to get ready for the classes. I think marketing is interesting, but do I want to spend an hour and a half in an evening reading some chapters and some cases having to do with marketing? No. I want to pick it up by osmosis, and I would.

But I made several friends. And several people told me later that my contributions at times were really good. Perhaps the focus should not be on the really good, but it definitely shaped my perspective on the school. I think it was very helpful when I became Deputy Dean, because then I knew something about these other fields.

G: What year was that?

R: That was 1990, '91. Maybe even the fall of 1990. Yeah.

B: That was soon after you probably got tenure.

R: Yes. That's right. It was the semester after I got tenure.

B: One of the things we want to swing around to, and you would have a perspective, having been in Dean's office, this goes to what Dean David wants to do. As you look at the school in terms of where it's really rung the bell, what have been the real important areas of accomplishment? What outsiders should say, if they had a good picture. What are the distinguishing breakthroughs, the big ideas?

R: When I was in the Senior Executive Program, I got all these lectures from Ed Schein, but I understand about all the stuff that happened early on in Organizational Studies.

B: Right. Doug McGregor, etc.

R: Yeah. And then the Finance Group. It had a heyday, and then it went down a bit. Maybe now it's regrown quite a bit, and Andy Lo and others. Then, in Operations Research and Operations Management, I could talk about all – I'm not sure I'm a good spokesperson for this, to tell you the truth. I'm mostly repeating what I've heard. I'm serious about that.

I'm more interested in what are the distinguishing features of Sloan right now? In fact, I would say I'm not so much interested in that question as I am in what are the distinguishing features of Sloan as a place for faculty, which is even narrower, right? And that, to me, comes to the issue of the faculty culture, which is a fragile, precious, easily—I wouldn't say poisoned—but easily compromised, and by just a few bad apples. It is incredible that it's something I will give my all to, to help nurture, because I think from a faculty perspective it distinguishes Sloan from any other business school by far. In other words, when I talk to faculty at other business schools, they don't have the kind of cultural environment among the faculty that we have here. That is, it's both research oriented, but also encourages educational innovation and entrepreneurship.

So here's a distinguishing point. If you look at the most recent teaching award winners, they correlate pretty well to our better researchers. Where do you see that at other business schools? Think about it. You've got Andy Lo, Rebecca Henderson.

You go to all of these different groups, and you see Simon Johnson. The flavor of his research is a little different, but it's still…

Rich Locke, Roberto Fernandez. I'm just trying to think, the sort of people who walk away with these awards.

Georgia Perakis won the Jamieson award this – no. She didn't win it this year. Retsef Levi won it. He won the big Jamieson – Jamieson is now the big teaching award at the school.

These are some of our stellar researchers. We encourage education. We encourage very high standards in research and teaching. I want to have a faculty culture that enjoys what I call "playing with ideas," which means pedagogically as well as in terms of creating original research. That is an amazing distinction. When I talk to faculty from other business schools, I hear them talk much more cynically about the students and the educational atmosphere. The students don't take the classroom as seriously. Here, we hardly even talk at all, thank goodness, about a tension between, say, consulting and other things. At other schools, the enticements for money, whether it be in executive programs or outside consulting, and the tradeoff there, is substantial.

G: How have we accomplished that? What's led up to that?

R: It's hard for me to say what led up to it except maybe key people who have just had a thought – I think of Tom Magnanti. Tom's legacy here has really been – some would say, "Oh, it's the LFM program," which is now LGO or "it's this," or, "it's that." But from where I sit, it is his value system which got mapped very firmly to Steve Graves, Gabe Bitran, me, Dimitri Bertsimas, and Georgia Perakis. Hopefully, we will map it to others, maybe already are. I should get outside my own group and – sister group – but also you look at other people. Andrew Lo is this way. My mind is a bit of a blank. But you can go all around the school, and you could say these guys are all like-minded in terms of their values.

G: Certainly, Sloan and Operations and Finance are consistently rated the number one school in those areas.

R: Yes. Right. That's convenient. The Andy Lo-s, the Dimitri Bertsimas-s—my mind is running a bit blank right now—are always developing new courses and new research. Those correlations are high. I'm not even saying getting the best ratings. I'm just saying the engine for entrepreneurial education here is quite active.

B: Do you think some of this comes from being at MIT with its emphasis on rigor? Yet we also want to apply, we want to make sure something works. So that leads to either entrepreneurial activity or good applications of the theory? The students who come know that's what MIT is all about. They're not just here to have a case discussion about general things. They want structure, analytics.

R: Those of us that are teaching more techie subjects to our regular MBAs, we have a certain advantage. I have colleagues at Columbia, and Wharton, and Stanford. They're like, "We write an equation on the blackboard, and the students start to groan."

I say, "It probably happens here. Then the student thinks, 'Damn. What was I thinking? I'm at MIT.'"

G: And that's why they're here.

R: I'm not sure that's why they're here. They might be here because they didn't get into Stanford or Harvard – some of them, anyway, to be honest. Because they are here, their expectations are altered about the classroom environment. I feel that our MBA students take the classroom seriously, and the faculty do. But that is not a stable equilibrium. As soon as one group checks out, the other's going to check out. My sense is that at many other business schools, that's what happens. So it's all a bit of a game. Whereas here, no one is viewing it as a game.

B: I like the way you've framed that to say, "What is it that's distinctive about the school?" And in turn, "What is it that's distinctive about the faculty?" And how it has to be preserved.

R: As Deputy Dean – I'm going to toot my own horn just a little – I had been a victim for years of the notion that no good deed goes unpunished. So when I became Deputy Dean, I thought, "I can't change that. Those are the rules of academic life. I'm not going to all of a sudden figure out a way that's going to reward people for doing good service, or being good managers or good teachers, something like that". But I thought, "I can institute a culture where that is explicitly recognized, and we can try and do things to minimize it." So I tell people, "Yes, you're really good at this, so we want you to do that. I know it's not why you're here. I don't enjoy asking you to do it. We both wish someone else would do this task. Let us figure out a way to make you less unhappy about doing this task, and figure out a way that makes sure you get the recognition you'd want and need for doing this task." That's how I would try and phrase it.

B: We should ask you: if you were in our shoes, what other things should we have asked you?

R: I made a few notes. You asked me about Sloan, and I talk about faculty. Not even about individuals, but about the faculty as an entity. So let me talk also about the other employees here, and I'm going to go out on a limb a little bit.

Late one night, perhaps after a few too many drinks had been had, I had a conversation with a woman who worked in the MBA Program office. We were just chatting about our jobs, and we were both complaining, "Oh, these whining MBAs. They want this, and then they want it that way. And if it's not three-hole punched, they complain. They feel so entitled, and they just want to, etc., etc., etc."

Then it turned to, "But we work so hard for them." And we seem to thrive on it. There's something about Sloan where everyone, not just faculty – and I'm sure people in administration and various managerial roles here, they're working just as hard or harder than any faculty are, on stuff that supports our programs. There's something about this place – in spite of the students, at times– where you just love making it all work. I'm mostly thinking about folks in Educational Services, and in the MBA Program Office, and in the EMBA. What makes people so dedicated to wanting this place to thrive, that they get so passionate about it. I don't know. It's some specialness, right? It's something that you can't – I don't know.

B: When I got here, there were two women who did everything. Esther [Merrill] and Miriam [Sherburne]. They set in place a tradition that's somehow been passed on.

R: Yes. Every administrator I've worked with here is so dedicated and so driven by great standards. Sometimes I just ask why? And I don't know.

B: Like Kathy Doyle who came over with our lunch, today.

R: Yeah.

B: George, do you have anything else? It's been a treat for me.

G: I want to go back to when you mentioned the new core, because that seemed to be an important time.

R: That was a turning point, I feel, for Sloan.

G: Also what you talked about, that educational innovation. You could see it as, okay; we have to design a new core. What do we put together? We're all going to have to teach this. And it becomes a challenge of muddling through. Or it could be a challenge of putting together something innovative.

R: No. Actually, it was a very stressful year, because the core was supposed to be that each area was supposed to have this unified course. BPS did its thing and developed this unified course that everybody participated in. Management Science, we tried but ultimately did not succeed. I think EF&A never even tried – or maybe didn't have to, because they had Econ, Finance and Accounting, whatever. John Little was in charge of our little committee, which was Arnie Barnett and myself. Arnie and I were good friends, but we could not agree on a single thing so it was very stressful. I resigned from the committee, or tried to. John Little said, "You're too late because Arnie just resigned." That was just how difficult it was. It was very difficult, even though we were good friends.

But I think that core design, the school's new design, forced people to re-think and re-create a modern MBA program, from the program's perspective, and not from, "Here's what my group wants to teach. Now give us a slot in this core." I think it was great.

It was interesting, as I recall, because it was right around the time I was getting tenure when this was happening. But it never was brought to a vote of the faculty. Steve Graves chaired the committee. The notion was, anything that went to a vote would be voted down, just because. I remember Steve had a description of what the new core design was for the school. The cover sheet was – and only Steve's sense of humor could do this – was a memo to Steve that you would fill in. It would say, "Insert name here." Then it said, "This is a great core. However, it leaves out the following, which are very important to me." So everybody could fill it in and send it to him.

G: He made sure he facilitated the input.

R: No, but in his own way, he was mocking the fact that he was not going to have a vote. That he knew almost no one was going to want this for themselves, but that his own steadfastness is "this is what the school needs for its future." It forced me, instead of teaching this course where I got great ratings, I knew how to keep those students smiling. But the curriculum was not a curriculum for a new century, that's for sure.

B: In terms of the timeline, somebody needs to pinpoint the journey of the school, certainly what we're talking about here, going to the core curriculum, and then a little bit later on when the MBA came into play.

R: The EMBA.

G: From an MS to an MBA.

R: Oh, right. That was Paul Healy and Glen Urban.

B: That was a little later then this. But in terms of the markers of how the school has evolved from a school of management with non-profits and health studies, to a full-fledged business school with MBA, and so on.

G: The reason I asked about the core was it seemed to also reflect what you were saying about faculty working together. If you have a core that people teach, it's different than people teaching their own courses, which keeps them separate. There's some integration that has to happen, even if it is within broader fields.

R: That's right. The school tried various attempts at cross-disciplinary integration, with some success and a lot of failure. And we keep doing it. So, Roberto Fernandez and I are going to try something new this fall.

This is more accident than anything else. I had a student named Soledad Jeria who had worked for LAN, the Chilean Airlines. She came to me after class one day and said, "I have an idea for a decision-analysis case." Basic probabilities. But this involved very messy data, and we don't do anything where the data's really messy, where you've got way too much data, or the wrong kind. You don't know what's relevant and what's not. They had two hours to make a multi-million dollar decision on how to get an aircraft airworthy as soon as possible. It had failed a test. Basically, they had to bring in parts from either the US or from Paris, down to Santiago. We created this case, and it's been taught for the last couple of years in DMD. It was the first-ever case in our course that was designed to be done by a team. I don't know anything about teams. You typically don't learn quantitative stuff in a team, but you typically have to apply quantitative tools in a team setting.

Apparently what's happened is this case has become a cult classic, and teams work on it. The data is so messy. Everybody has a different take on how they should even go about doing the analysis. People fight and argue, and all this other stuff, mostly constructively, but the team dynamics really come out. I thought, "If that's the case, let me talk to the OP faculty. Maybe we can re-write this. Maybe we can build that into it." This was not the design, originally. Hopefully, we'll do something with this.

B: But you say you're going to do a course?

R: No. It'll be a case in the core.

G: Across the two fields?

R: That's what I'm hoping. I think there will be a team dynamics component that they'll have to study. We're going to meet in a couple of weeks to talk about this.

B: Great.

R: It was not the intent. The intent was messy data.

B: That's great. Well, it's fun to have this chance to talk with you, Rob.

R: I just hope I haven't tooted my horn too much here.

B: No. I don't think you have. You've been a great citizen of this enterprise.

R: It seems, at times, that Dave and others have wanted to talk about the sacrifice that I did, or the service I was doing. But I would say one thing I learned from Tom Magnanti, which I strongly believe in, is faculty are best when they are pursuing their self-interest. Now, that has to be done with integrity. But self interest is an important part of being able to do great things here. You're not doing it in some martyr mode or anything.

The main reason I became Deputy Dean was I felt it would give me an opportunity to grow emotionally and challenge me in terms of my own development as a person, which I badly needed. So it may look to the outside world that this was "take one for the team," kind of, or for the school. It was actually done, in large part, for my own sake. Although not a traditional view on it all.

B: Has it changed your view of the human nature of faculty?

R: Yes. Well, did it change it? I would say it refined it. I was forced to focus on it, as opposed to trying to avoid it. Yeah. When you're dealing with faculty you're dealing with folks who are faculty. Let's not say much more about that. But also I'd say to me, the basic negotiation is, you need their goodwill, and they need your goodwill.