

A Conversation with Albert H. Bowker

Ingram Olkin

Albert Bowker was born in Winchendon, Massachusetts, on September 8, 1919. He received a B.S. in Mathematics from MIT in 1941, and a Ph.D. in Mathematical Statistics from Columbia University in 1949. He was on the Stanford faculty from 1947 to 1963, serving as founding Chairman of the Statistics Department and Dean of the Graduate Division. In 1963, he became Chancellor of the City University of New York. He returned to California in 1971 as Chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley. In 1980 he was appointed as the first Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education in the newly formed U. S. Department of Education. In 1981 he went to the University of Maryland as founding Dean of the School of Public Affairs and later became Executive Vice President. In September 1986, he returned to the City University of New York, and now serves as Vice-President for Planning of its Research Foundation. In 1961-1962, he was president of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics, and in 1964, president of the American Statistical Association. Honors include the Frederick Douglass Award of the New York Urban League; the Medal for Distinguished Service of Teachers College, Columbia University; Shewhart Award of the American Society for Quality Control; Berkeley Citation; Distinguished Public Service Award, Department of the Navy; Order De Leopold II; and honorary degrees from the City University of New York, University of the State of New York (Regents), Brandeis University and Antioch University. He has been a member of the boards of various professional and educational organizations including MIT, the University of Haifa and Bennington College.

The following conversation took place in his home in Washington, D. C. in October 1986.

I STARTED AT MIT

Olkin: Al, perhaps you can begin by telling us about your statistical background before and after your education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Bowker: In June of 1937 I graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School, which is a block and a half from where we are now sitting in Washington, and that fall enrolled in MIT as a freshman. My original idea was to become an engineer of some sort, although my father and most of his friends had been research scientists at the National Bureau of Standards. But finally, discouraged largely by a drafting and chemistry laboratory, I decided that I wasn't inclined enough mechanically to become an engineer. I then transferred to mathematics.

It was very pleasant at MIT because, although mathematics is a very large major today, there were

only a few people in my class. Actually, mathematics had graduates every now and then in those days rather than every year. So by transferring as an undergraduate to mathematics, I became part of a small community and was entertained socially by the faculty; I had a small office as a junior.

Olkin: Who were the faculty at that time?

Bowker: The people in statistics were George Wadsworth, who was in the mathematics department, and Harold Freeman, who was in the economics department. I became quite close to both of them as well as with Ken Arnold, who had just finished his doctorate and was an Instructor, and with some of the other mathematicians.

Olkin: Was Norbert Wiener there at the time?

Bowker: Wiener was there, and I took a course from him as an undergraduate. Although I never understood it, I got an A in the course. But it was really Freeman and Wadsworth who interested me in statistics.