A worldly outlook and thirst for knowledge fuels Colgate’s 16th president

By Rebecca Costello

Jeff Herbst built his first model rocket when he was 10 years old. It was made of balsa wood and cardboard, and powered by a solid propellant. Growing up in the dawn of human space exploration (he was 8 years old when man first landed on the moon), he would get up in the middle of the night to watch televised space launches. Model rockets were a perfect hobby for a young boy who intended to be an astronaut when he grew up.

Over the years, his rockets got bigger, faster, and more complex. Now, they have computerized navigation systems and telemetry. They can break the sound barrier. They require clearance from the FAA to launch near airports.

But while he may have become a college president instead of an astronaut, even with his feet planted firmly on the ground, Herbst has always aimed for the upper atmosphere.

Thirsty learner


It is easy to get to know Jeff Herbst through his actions, the life experiences he talks about, and the anecdotes that those who know him well tell about him.

Born in Jamaica, Queens, he is the oldest of three children. His father, Adolph, an engineer, came from a family of “bourgeois German Jews from outside

Globetrotter

Nuremburg who had the good fortune to escape Hitler in 1939,” he said. His mother, Rose, was a teacher from a family of New Yorkers. They met on a blind date set up by their mothers, who were both secretaries at Collier’s magazine.

When Jeff was 4 and his sister, Susan, was 3, Adolph took a job with IBM in Fishkill, N.Y., and the family moved upstate to Peekskill. The youngest Herbst sibling, Steven, soon came along. Susan described the family as a “very conventional American tableau,” with the classic road trip in the station wagon for a two-week vacation in New Hampshire or Maine each summer, and Mom and Dad, as Steven put it, “supportive of anything we wanted to do.”

Rose, a third-grade teacher, and Adolph, an avid reader, set an intellectual tone in the home. Their eldest son needed no cajoling in that area. By kindergarten, he had picked up reading all on his own. Susan clearly recalls the day the school bus driver nicknamed her studious big brother “Professor” when he was in first grade. And, according to Steven, “if you didn’t read the New York Times, you were in trouble, because at the dinner table you had to be ready to talk about what was going on in the world.”

Jeff got hooked reading the Times by first or second grade, said Rose. “In fact, one day, Steven had to take it to school for some reason. Jeffrey walked up many flights of stairs at the Central Bank to talk to the CEO,” she recalled. These days, his daily news fix still includes the Times, as well as the Wall Street Journal in print, and online, the Washington Post, Jerusalem Post, and South Africa’s Mail & Guardian as well as other African and world news outlets.

Taking on new interests at an unusually young age became something of a habit. Only a middle schooler when home computers first hit the market, he insisted he had to have his own — he thought electric typewriters were passe’,” said Rose. Still keeping up on the latest technology, when he arrived at Colgate in July, he picked up a Droid X smart phone so that he could plug into the mobile apps world.

Jeff exercised his political interests — and honed his communication skills — on the high school debate team. Just a year apart in school, he and Susan became formidable debate partners, winning a national championship in 1979. The two eldest Herbst siblings went on to pursue somewhat parallel academic tracks; also a political scientist, Susan studies public opinion, mass media, and policy making in the United States and serves as vice chancellor of the University System of Georgia.

The whole family would travel to debate tournaments, where younger brother Steven noted “a certain competitive side to Jeff. He wasn’t just there to have some fun, although I’m sure that was part of it. He was there to achieve great things.”

That competitive nature also played out through his interest in sports. He may not discuss last night’s football game at the office, but, as Steven put it, “He’s what I call the underrated sports fan. One of my earliest memories of Jeff was watching sports together, and he was a big influence in making me a New York sports fan, specifically a Mets, Jets, and Knicks fan.” Today, Steven is executive vice president and general manager of the CBS College Sports Network.

Model student

Not long after starting college at Princeton University, Herbst found his lifelong interest in the politics of sub-Saharan Africa.

“I happened to take a course called Politics of Africa, which was taught by Henry Bienen, who was then professor of politics and would later become my dean at the Woodrow Wilson School when I was a faculty member, and later would be president of Northwestern University,” Herbst explained. “At about the same time, I took a developmental economics course from Sir W. Arthur Lewis, the Caribbean economist who had just won the Nobel Prize in economics.”

Then, as a junior, he landed a grant to do research in Nigeria on its political and economic relations in the West African region. It was 1982.

“It was the first time I had ever been out of the country. I had to get a passport,” said Herbst. “Lagos, the capital, where I was, was at the end of the second oil boom and it was just about at the end of their democracy, although the Nigerians didn’t know that yet.”

He found Nigeria to be a “fantastically exciting, complex, corrupt place,” he said. One day, he walked up many flights of stairs at the Central Bank to talk to an economist. The lights were out in the building.

“I asked, ‘Did the plant fail?’ The man replied, ‘No, we don’t have electricity because the power authority demanded a bribe from us and we refused to pay.’ Here was one branch of the government essentially shaking down another. I thought, this requires further study.”

He undertook that investigation with gusto, and by the end of his time in Nigeria, he said, “I had absolutely decided I wanted to make the study of Africa my career.” That trip also sparked a lifelong passion for travel, a useful trait for someone who studies foreign countries. “No one loves to travel more than
Jeff,” said brother Steven. “He loves to experience new places. He loves to learn anything and everything about wherever he is.”

“From the beginning, Jeff wasn’t a conventional student,” said Bienen, who, with his expertise in political and economic development, comparative politics, civil-military relations, and U.S. foreign policy in Africa became a strong role model and mentor for Herbst. “He had already acquired a lot of knowledge. A lot of students come to a course on Africa as something exotic; he knew more about his subject matter than most.”

Herbst wrote about smuggling in Nigeria for his senior thesis — “which always seemed to me a very dangerous subject,” said Bienen, his adviser on the project. “When I met his parents, I thought they were going to kill me for sending him off to Nigeria [“I thought we’d never see him again,” said Rose]. But Jeff survived the experience, and he did a very systematic, thorough study, which was excellent.”

After graduating summa cum laude from Princeton in 1983, he undertook graduate school at Yale University. There, he distinguished himself among “a particularly good crop of graduate students. He was just brighter, across the board,” said William Foltz, the H.J. Heinz Professor Emeritus of African studies at Yale, who particularly remembers a seminar with Herbst as “one of the most consistently interesting and stimulating graduate seminars I’ve ever taught. He was very good at taking a contrary position, exploring, pushing.”

At that time, Zimbabwe was emerging from colonial rule, and becoming a seemingly considerable success, Herbst notèd. “Things, of course, went quite terribly wrong after that,” he noted, but at that point, he was drawn to learn why Zimbabwe was doing well, as opposed to other African nations. He spent 18 months in Harare, writing his dissertation on autonomy and decision making on policy formulation and implementation, which garnered recognition from the American Political Science Association; he received the Gabriel Almond Award for the best doctoral dissertation in the field of comparative politics.

When Herbst finished his PhD studies in 1987, Bienen said, he “was very eager to bring him back to Princeton.” Bienen hired his former student to teach in the politics department.

**Family man**

Shortly after returning to Princeton to teach, another new chapter in Herbst’s life opened up. His sister, then a graduate student, was attending a conference for public opinion researchers, where she met the friend of a friend named Sharon Polansky. Sharon had just taken a job as a senior research director at the Gallup Organization in Princeton after graduating with her PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Susan Herbst suggested to Sharon that she set her up with her brother, who had just moved there himself.

“I was dubious as opposed to intrigued, mostly because it was a blind date,” said Polansky, but also because it seemed to her that they would have little in common.

“Susan said, ‘What harm can come from it? He could just be a friend,’” Sharon recalled. “Lo and behold, we had lunch, and then we had another lunch, and so it went. That was really a surprise to everybody, including his sister and my friend. They were married in 1988.

The couple has three children: Matthew, a sophomore at Miami University, Spencer, a first-year at Syracuse University, and Alana, a junior at Hamilton Central School. The whole family shares Jeff’s passion for travel, so work as well as play have taken the family all over the world. For one year before Alana was born, they lived in South Africa when he served as a visiting Fulbright professor at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape. In addition to filling up their U.S. passports on international trips, the family also picked up a National Park Passport and set about visiting a different national park each year — incorporating at least a bit of learning into every vacation.

The children also picked up their father’s interest in model rocketry, and when they’re not looking up at the sky, water sports like kayaking and rafting are another family pastime.

When Jeff reads for pleasure (about a book a week, outside his academic reading), it’s likely to be “police procedurals based in foreign countries,” a la P.D. James, or an academic novel. It can be tough to buy him a book by a favorite writer, said Sharon, because “he exhausts authors; he’ll read everything a person has written and then move on.”

**Expert and contributor**

Over the last 20-plus years, Herbst has become a leading scholar on Africa, covering a wide variety of issues, from the politics of economic and political reform, to boundaries and the formation of state systems. He regularly serves as an expert source for the media and writes op-eds for international publications. In addition to serving as a consultant for the United Nations and World Bank, he has been tapped by the State Department, Department of Defense, and National Intelligence Council on issues such as the role of the United States in combating terrorist threats and the dynamics of African democracies and African economic management. He has also lectured at the Air Force Special Operations School, National Defense University, and Army War College, where, for example, he has covered the overall security environment facing African governments.

One interest about which he has written extensively, citizenship law, was sparked by his father’s experience escaping Nazi Germany. “His parents got
to go immediately to the United States, but he was trapped in Belgium for a while. During that time, Hitler stripped the Jews of their citizenship. My father became stateless,” said Herbst. “That concept has always fascinated me because, of course, now we believe that every single person has a state.”

“Jeff has made a lot of contributions to how we think about state formations,” said Bienen, noting that, although in Africa there are many weak states, there have been relatively few boundary changes where one might have expected more. “He contributed a lot to the literature as to why that didn’t happen — why those state systems stayed stable.”

In his writings, Herbst is happy to challenge the prevailing wisdom, said Foltz. “In his very good book on the African state, his principal argument is that some states ought to fail — in effect, take the political equivalent of Chapter 11 and perhaps be taken over by other states. Others have been forced to rethink these subjects.”

Among Herbst’s recent work in this area has been a string of articles questioning the sovereignty of Congo because, he says, it does not exert enough authority over its own people and land to be considered sovereign. “One of the mistakes we made is that, just because these countries became independent does not mean that they should be considered sovereign forever,” he explained. “Look at the map of Europe. It changes all the time.”

In a contrasting situation, he has also been writing about Somaliland, a region in northwest Somalia that has been declared its own country but is not recognized by anyone. “It’s actually doing much better in terms of how it treats its own people than countries we do consider sovereign,” he said. “I ask the question, why do we consider Zimbabwe sovereign when its leadership has essentially declared war on its population, when Somaliland, a breakaway portion of a country that’s otherwise in chaos, rules itself as best it can, but no one recognizes it? Is that really the only choice we’re stuck with?”

Of his motivation to pursue this work, he said, “Politics is so consequential to the life chances of millions of people in Africa. People often ask, ‘Does it matter who’s in charge?’ But if African leaders make the right decisions, as evidenced by the transition to majority rule in South Africa, then things get better quite quickly. If they make the wrong decisions, as we’ve seen in Zimbabwe, it can be quite terrible. The countries have such weak institutions, and they’re so poor, that politics is not just a game of the elite.”

Having lived in some of the countries he studies, his work is also personal. “I’ve seen Zimbabwe fall apart. The University of Zimbabwe, where I taught, came apart completely as an institution,” he said. “Many of my friends have had to emigrate to survive, to get better lives for themselves, and because they didn’t believe their children could get educations. And millions of people, who in a different set of circumstances would have advanced, are today malnourished, dying of AIDS. The country may not recover from what’s been done to it by its own leaders for decades or more.”

His scholarship has also influenced or enhanced those traits family and colleagues attribute to Herbst, from his unflappable nature to his practical outlook. When you ask people how they de-stress, they talk about going to the gym, or doing yoga, or taking a nice wine with dinner. But — although he does make a habit of exercising in the mornings — when you ask Herbst that question, he talks about delving into his academic work. Recounting a recent meeting with the vice chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe, he said, “He told me he brings a jerry can to work each day because there is no water to flush the toilet. After that, the things you deal with… You put them in perspective.”

**Politics is so consequential to the life chances of millions of people in Africa.**
the past five years, describe him as a change agent with a consultative, but get-it-done leadership style. Karen Shaffer, who, as secretary of the university, worked with Herbst on running the faculty senate and the promotion and tenure process, described a typical meeting where a seemingly unanswerable issue came up. “He just got up and went down the hall and got the person who really could make this happen,” she said. “They talked, and ten minutes later, it was a done deal. Another issue came up, he went back down the hall, got another person. Instead of twenty different memos and a whole month [of time], you’ve got it solved right then and there. I was amazed.”

“He’s as close to a homo economicus or rational actor as I’ve worked with,” said Jeanne Hey, director of Miami’s International Studies Program, who served as an interim regional campus dean in Herbst’s last year as provost. Whatever the initiative, she said, “he clearly identified a series of goals and problems to be solved and set about approaching them in a transparent, step-by-step process. This meant applying his own advocacy and work, defining stakeholders, listening to constituencies, developing options and getting feedback, and, finally, implementing policies aimed at achieving the goal.”

Herbst employed that approach in elevating many aspects of the learning and teaching environment at Miami. He promoted internationalization by broadening the curriculum and expanding opportunities for study abroad. He expanded outreach efforts in the community. He championed academic integrity on campus. And he increased access for students of limited means, as well as significantly increased multicultural diversity.

One of Herbst’s particular passions is the evolving intersection of technology and teaching. Glenn Platt, director of the Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies (AIMS) at Miami, described a group visit to leading Silicon Valley tech companies in which Herbst participated. “I particularly remember the meeting at Apple,” Platt recounted. “In the conversation about what technology could do — what has been done, and what can be done — I will go so far as to say that Jeff was pushing the Apple people. He was laying out some dramatic and forward-thinking ideas, and they were trying to keep up with him.” The story of how AIMS blossomed under Herbst’s watch captures how his vision for higher education — from technology concerns to administrative structure to internationalization — is uniquely synthesized. Students and professors study how digital and interactive media are disrupting traditional disciplines, through a major and a minor as well as independent study, thesis, research, and client-based projects. The AIMS faculty and students come from all five university divisions to work in an interdisciplinary setting.

Herbst helped to shape faculty hiring practices in a way that benefited such an interdisciplinary institute, by rethinking traditional institutional structures, said Platt. “He said, ‘Maybe being in one department isn’t the right way for a program like this to run.’” So the institute now hires professors who are not housed in any one department, and a promotion and tenure committee is tailored for each person by drawing faculty members from relevant disciplines. “Instead of having someone conform to the institution,” Platt explained, “the institution figures out a way to conform to that person.”

On a trip to Dharamsala, India, to broker a student exchange program between Miami University and the Sarah College for Higher Tibetan Studies (with which the Dalai Lama is affiliated), Herbst identified several needs that led to other fortuitous connections. All AIMS students take a capstone course where real-world paying clients, usually businesses, hire them to build digital solutions to their problems. Out of his trip came three capstone projects working for Sarah College: an interactive online Tibetan language course, a digital archive of endangered Tibetan documents created in partnership with Google; and a 3-D virtual reality mandala — which His Holiness himself would get to “move through” when the students presented their projects to him on his visit to Miami in October, arranged through Herbst’s inspired invitation.

Many of his accomplishments took place in tight economic times, and of the lessons he learned in his Miami post, said Herbst, one was that “tremendous things could often be done without access to large amounts of resources.” Revamping the course evaluation system, for example, from one in which each division had its own instrument, to a common set based on best practices, was a time-consuming yet not costly project. “Evaluating teaching in the best possible way is absolutely critical to an institution,” he said. “While not as dramatic as building a new building, these kinds of things have a profound effect because they get into the landscape. I also saw the power of incentives when they are aligned with the mission of the institution, as well as just how profoundly a dedicated faculty can do in teaching and service.”

When he left Miami to take up the presidency at Colgate, the impact he had made, and the esteem and affection his colleagues had for him, could be seen at his farewell party, where, rounding out the remarks and thanks, they roasted him royally, and a group of deans concocted a parody sung to the tune of Simon and Garfunkel’s “Mrs. Robinson.”

Shortly after arriving on Colgate’s campus, Herbst remarked that he and his family, who have settled in at Watson House, are grateful for the warm embrace they have received from the extended community. In describing his new charge, he said, “Leading Colgate is a unique honor. While many institutions are hunkering down, trying to survive, Colgate wants to move forward boldly. I think that is rare in the current age, and I find that tremendously exciting.”
Jeffrey Herbst on moving forward boldly

In his first day as Colgate’s 16th president, Jeffrey Herbst set forth to exemplify two of his goals in moving the university forward boldly: to foster alumni intellectual engagement, and to reinforce the personal connections made possible at a residential liberal arts university. First, he gave the closing remarks to the alumni “students” at the inaugural Summer on the Hill program, and then he interacted with members of the community at a campuswide gathering. At events like those in Hamilton, and in appearances across the country, Herbst is articulating his vision for Colgate and the unique opportunities and challenges that the university and higher education are facing today. Here is a taste of what he is saying:

...on his ambition for Colgate:
"From when I first met the presidential search committee, I was excited by the stated goal of Colgate becoming the best liberal arts university in the country. That is an ambition appropriate for Colgate, especially in light of its extraordinary faculty and its commitment to a liberal arts education."

...on liberal arts in the 21st century:
" Appropriately, there is a debate over the value of a liberal arts education in the 21st century. I believe that Colgate’s basic approach to education is especially important now. Our students will have lives and careers that will span most of this century. They will have jobs in professions that we cannot currently imagine. They will interact with people from other societies on a routine basis. Therefore, an education that allows them to pursue critical inquiry, to put difficult issues in context, and to understand the motivations and orientations of others — some of the goals of a liberal arts education — is absolutely critical, and never more valuable."

...on financial aid:
"Making Colgate accessible to as many students as possible is amongst my highest priorities. Currently, we are unable to admit some outstanding students because we cannot afford them. As the college-going population, especially in the Northeast (from which Colgate has traditionally drawn many of its students) begins to decline, significant financial aid resources will be especially important. Of course, financial aid is also vital to having a diverse student population. The fundraising campaign Passion for the Climb has already been extremely successful in garnering new resources to aid students. We plan to use the time until May 2012 (when the campaign will end) to raise even more resources for this important priority. The enormous support that alumni and parents have provided Colgate in this area is especially rewarding."

...on the budget:
"Colgate is fortunate to have a long history of balanced budgets and a conservative approach to spending. The university acted proactively to the recession that began in 2008 and developed a comprehensive plan to adjust expenditures. These decisions were not easy, but now allow us to plan for the future without making ad hoc decisions to balance the books in the short term."

...on the economic challenges moving forward:
"Colgate, like other colleges and universities, benefitted from a buoyant economic climate for many years. Tuition increased above inflation, and there were also robust earnings from the endowment. As a result, in recent years, expenditures increased annually by about five percent. Moving forward, we recognize that there is far less room for tuition increases, especially given the significant wealth that our nation has lost in recent years. At the same time, while no one can predict the stock market, it does not seem appropriate to be overly optimistic about gains from the endowment. It is likely that expenditures will grow by approximately two percent annually in the next few years. Yet, at the same time, Colgate must continue to innovate and change. We are in the knowledge business, and knowledge is changing faster than ever before. Yet we cannot, unlike the past, depend on new monies to fund our initiatives. We will therefore have to look very closely at all of our spending to make sure that we are devoting appropriate resources to our highest priorities. This will require that we look at possibilities for reallocating resources, the same kind of decisions that families, corporations, and governments are currently making."

...on internationalization:
"Our students will graduate into a world where they will continually interact with people from other countries. Globalization promises enormous benefits for our society, but there are also threats from overseas that must be understood. One of the reasons that I was attracted to Colgate was because of its extremely progressive approach to internationalization. We have long had a very high study-abroad participation rate, and the study groups have benefitted generations of Colgate students. We have to continue to promote internationalization, while making sure that our study-abroad options are appropriate for a world where regions outside of Europe are increasingly important. My goal is to try to ensure that Colgate students have the opportunity to learn where it makes the most sense for them to go given their studies and interests. Finally, we are delighted at the increase in the number of foreign students coming to Colgate and hope to further this trend in the future."

...on technology:
"We know that advances in technology will affect higher education in many ways. We must remain current with developments, making sure that our networks and machines offer students the most opportunities possible. Yet, at the same time, it is sometimes hard to tie technological advances to actual gains in learning. We therefore have to develop a holistic approach to technology so that we can adopt throughout the institution those innovations that will help us advance our fundamental mission."