

Finding the Fit

For Mizzou's new chancellor, Alexander Cartwright, the quest to develop human potential is a personal one. Story by Erik Potter * Photo by Shane Epping

One evening in 1985, while working on a factory floor, a young Alexander Cartwright got what turned out to be a fateful call: The owner wanted to see him in his office.

Cartwright was working at HWH Corp. in the small town of Moscow, Iowa, making hydraulic jacks for recreational vehicles. With this job and earlier ones cleaning hog confinement buildings and working at a Stuckey's, he had put himself through his GED certificate and community college coursework. Now, the factory job was paying for tuition at the University of Iowa, where he was a business major. Because he was good at math, he had decided to become an accountant.

Wondering why he'd been summoned, Cartwright climbed the steps to the office of Paul Hanser, the company founder and president. It wasn't admonition that awaited him but rather advice. "I've heard you're doing really well in school," Cartwright remembers the older man telling him. "Why are you going into accounting when you're so good with your hands? Do you really think you can spend the rest of your life behind a desk?" Instead, Hanser suggested that he major in engineering.

Cartwright was an immigrant — he and his mother had moved to Iowa from the Bahamas just two years before — and a first-generation college student. Higher education's possibilities were mysterious to him. "I didn't know what engineering was," Cartwright says. "I didn't know what engineers did." Although Cartwright had quickly learned how to operate almost every machine in the factory after starting as a custodian, he'd never considered engineering as a career. "I thought about his advice for a long time and talked to people in engineering at the University of Iowa," he

says. "And he was right."

Cartwright switched his major and never looked back. Having built a distinguished career in academia as a researcher and administrator, he started Aug. 1 as the University of Missouri's 23rd chancellor. He is a fellow in the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Academy of Inventors, and SPIE, the international society for optics and photonics. Not too bad for someone who might never have chosen engineering without that call from Hanser.

The fact that Cartwright's life turned on one person's offer of guidance shapes his view of universities' human development and service missions. He feels that almost every major decision in his life was shaped by a few key individuals' advice at the right time. He likes the economics idea of "opportunity cost" — that the cost of something is not just what you paid for it but what else you could have done with the money. "We have an opportunity cost with people," Cartwright says. For lack of knowledge, some people might skip college or choose to study something they understand — accounting — while missing out on something they would love — engineering.

"Not everybody is privileged to be exposed to multiple careers at a young age and be able to say, 'This is what I like or don't like,'" Cartwright says. "We might have Einsteins out there who should go into physics, but they don't know what physics is." Universities must show students where they can be exceptional.

Cartwright sees Mizzou's role as helping students and the state become the best version of themselves. "If we can do that, we'll win back people who doubt what Mizzou is about." **M**

For more on Mizzou's next steps, see Page 6.

The background

Bachelor's degree: electrical and computer engineering, University of Iowa

Doctorate: electrical and computer engineering, University of Iowa

First faculty job: assistant professor of engineering at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Most recent job: chief academic officer for the 64-campus State University of New York system

Research: optical materials and sensors

Publications: 150

Patents: 4

Patent licenses to private companies: 3



+ MU's new chancellor, Alexander Cartwright, was born in the Bahamas and raised in the Midwest. His up-by-the-bootstraps life story includes earning a GED, attending community college and eventually winning patents as an engineering researcher. As a college administrator, Cartwright led academics at a 64-campus system in New York. When it comes to accessibility and affordability, he says, "I know firsthand how truly transformative public higher education can be, no matter your socioeconomic background."