

Our Community, Our Values

December 20, 2023



Dear fellow members of the Columbia community:

In advance of the winter break, we write to tell you that we are launching a series of [initiatives to reinvest in Columbia's values and mission](#). These convenings, dialogues, professional development activities, resources, and other efforts are designed to foster a community where debates and disagreements are rooted in academic rigor and civil discourse.

This institution is an extraordinary place, where the best minds, for 269 years, have devoted themselves to research, teaching, learning, and global engagement with extraordinary expertise, determination, and compassion. This is a call to rededicate ourselves to that vital work, and to move ahead, with courage and conviction, to build a community where all of us can learn, work, and thrive.

The past few months have been incredibly challenging for so many. We have had hundreds of conversations with students, faculty, staff, and alumni who are dealing with deep pain, grief, and anger. We feel very keenly the fear and feeling of devastation, particularly among the Arab, Israeli, Jewish, Muslim, and Palestinian members of our community.

We also have witnessed the many ways, big and small, that you have shown up for each other, been kind to your peers and colleagues, and looked out for those who are struggling. With these initiatives, we will build on that culture of empathy and care. We will recommit ourselves to serving as a home for intellectual discovery and debate that honors the humanity of all its members.

This work will build on other efforts to support students, faculty, and staff who are in distress and will ensure everyone's collective right to learn, work, and live together, free from bigotry, intimidation, and harassment. These efforts have included the creation of a Task Force on Antisemitism, a Doxing Resource Group, and enhanced community resources and support, among other initiatives.

We strive to be a community free of discrimination or prejudice and we condemn the antisemitism and anti-Muslim and Arab hate that is far too pervasive today. We urge you to read the [powerful statement](#) signed by the deans of Columbia's faculties and 17 schools, an extraordinary expression of unity and principles that we strongly endorse. We want everyone at Columbia to feel safe, seen, welcome, and heard. We want everyone to be able to engage with differing perspectives and to navigate the discomfort that comes with that. Our differences should be a source of strength, a critical part of what makes university communities like ours excel as incubators of knowledge and innovation.

Below you will find descriptions of the new initiatives. We and other University leaders will continue to update you as the work evolves.

Listening Forums

The Office of the President will be hosting [Listening Forums](#) throughout the academic year to expand opportunities for students to communicate directly with senior leaders, including President Shafik, about the issues that affect them on campus.

The primary goal is for University leaders to hear from a diverse range of students to better understand the perspectives of our undergraduates and graduates on a variety of topics. This will be an opportunity to share experiences, surface ideas and concerns that are percolating, and foster the kind of open but respectful dialogue that is so essential to our shared values and mission.

Dialogue Across Difference Initiative

The Dialogue Across Difference initiative is designed for students, faculty, and staff to cultivate resilient and inclusive learning communities where freedom of expression flourishes within a culture of civility and empathy. It will strengthen the critical skills necessary to confront competing viewpoints and to hold challenging conversations with mutual respect.

The initiative will include an array of programs and events. Initial programming includes a signature Awakening Our Democracy event co-hosted by the Journalism School and University Life in mid-February, which will anchor a Week of Dialogue featuring events across the University, as well as a continuation of the School of International and Public Affairs' "Across the Aisle" series.

These panels, conversations, and workshops will tackle contentious, challenging societal issues from multiple viewpoints, assess obstacles to civic dialogue, and explore potential solutions. The rest of the spring semester will feature a range of programming and discussions throughout the campus.

The initiative will include seed grant programs for faculty and for students. These funds will support the creation of organic collaborative initiatives and will empower faculty, staff, and students to develop new forums and approaches for learning and dialogue.

The initiative also will support professional development for faculty and staff. We are offering a range of new workshops and resources for faculty as they navigate challenging classroom dynamics. On the staff front, we have retained expert advisors to provide professional development for schools' student-facing staff on both general skills in navigating differences and implementing de-escalation strategies, and specifically on addressing the current conflict.

Rules Review

As recognized in the Rules of University Conduct: "[T]he University has a vital interest in fostering a climate in which nothing is immune from scrutiny. And Columbia, in particular, has a long tradition of valuing dissent and controversy and in welcoming the clash of opinions onto the campus." The University recognizes two kinds of limitations on the right of freedom of expression: reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions and restrictions on expression that "constitutes a genuine threat of harassment, that unjustifiably invades an individual's privacy, or that falsely defames a specific individual. . . . The University has an obligation to assure members of its community that they can continue in their academic pursuits without fear for their personal security or other serious intrusions on their ability to teach and to study."

Consistent with that tradition and obligation, it is essential that University policies and rules that apply to demonstrations, protests, sit-ins, vigils, and other events are clear and accessible and provide the means to address discrimination and harassment, and that the enforcement process around those rules and policies is fair, consistent, and transparent. To that end, we are collaborating with the University Senate, student leaders, faculty, and other members of the community on a review of University event policies and the Rules of University Conduct to which those policies relate.

The University takes seriously the obligation to assure that all members of the Columbia community can pursue their academic activities without fear for their safety. The University has been clear that incitement to violence on campus will not be tolerated. We are enforcing our policies for campus events to ensure that debate and protest take place in a safe manner and that there are consequences for violations.

Enhanced Reporting Initiative

Finally, we are launching a University-wide effort to identify ways to make reporting more comfortable and to ensure a [rapid response process](#) for allegations of hate speech, harassment, and other forms of disruptive behavior, including antisemitic, anti-Arab, and anti-Muslim conduct, and to offer support for students who are in distress around these issues. To that end, we are working on plans to create a helpline and in-person help desk to answer questions about how to report and access our support systems; to make it easier for the community to find our online reporting form; to supplement staff in our investigatory and support offices; to integrate our systems to provide more seamless reporting and response; to enhance training for staff in these areas; and to improve communication throughout the process. We know this is an important issue for our students, and we are committed to investing the time and resources, including support from outside experts, to get this right.

Looking Ahead

In the coming weeks, we will build on these programs and initiatives and turn to new efforts to take advantage of the research and scholarship that makes Columbia a vital force for knowledge and constructive debate, especially around difficult issues. An important priority is providing additional support and resources for students and other members of our community affected by current events, across all our campuses. This will be an area of focus over the winter break.

Another initiative under development is a group to examine the foundation, history, and contemporary drivers of various forms of bias and intolerance, in particular anti-Islamic bias and anti-Arab racism. The group would look at how and why these behaviors are perpetuated and produce recommendations aimed at enhancing a culture of respect for everyone in the University community.

The previously announced [Task Force on Antisemitism](#) is already working on short-term recommendations to address the harmful impact of rising antisemitism on Columbia's Jewish community and to ensure that protection, respect, and belonging extends to everyone. Longer term, it will also offer recommendations for institutionalizing, and sustained progress toward, an improved campus climate. These groups will explore ways to collaborate with one another.

We are confident that these efforts will contribute to ensuring that Columbia is a vibrant and welcoming home to robust, open debate and dialogue, and is a community where everyone feels safe and respected. We wish you all the best this holiday season and look forward to seeing you again in January.

Sincerely,

Minouche Shafik
President, Columbia University in the City of New York
Dennis Mitchell
Interim Provost