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Columbia Needs Countercultural Leadership

Bad governance leads to moral paralysis



EVERYONE ASKS ME: What is it like to be a Jewish student at Columbia? My friends and I have answered this question in just about every conceivable forum, from television interviews to op-eds to informal Shabbat-meal conversations to closed-door meetings with community

and university leaders.

It's in the last of these forums, those closed-door meetings with university leaders, that I have learned the most about why we find ourselves at the present impasse, where marching mobs continue to intimidate and harass Jewish students while disrupting the broader learning environment with near impunity. It's not merely, or even primarily, about antisemitism. The central problem is a dysfunc-

tional governance structure that disempowers top administrators and awards faculty members undue control.



It's long been debated whether people or political systems matter more. Many notable donors and elected officials who point to problems on campus seem to believe that we simply have the wrong people leading our institutions. Their solution is to replace top administrators — such as Harvard's Claudine Gay and Penn's Liz Magill — with leaders they expect will change the reality on campus and answer more satisfactorily before Congress. There might be some truth to this: Stronger leaders might direct our universities back to their core values. But look at Columbia: new president, same problems.

The people are not the root of the problem. The root is a dysfunctional political system. Specifically, it's a system that is both *structurally* and *culturally* broken. The *structure* of democratized university governance, as opposed to strong executive governance, breeds a *culture* of disempowered leadership and minimal accountability.

At Columbia, shared governance began in the wake of protests in 1968, when the campus was overrun by a group of activists pushing, not unlike today's protesters, an anti-authority agenda. The group famously broke into Hamilton Hall and other campus buildings, barricading themselves inside until the Columbia administration called in the NYPD to arrest the burglars on April 30 of that year. Sound familiar?

In response to an out-of-control campus, Columbia extended new rights and powers to students and faculty, most notably through the creation of a University Senate. Today, Columbia's bloated University Senate consists of 111 members (larger by 11 than the U.S. Senate): 65 faculty, 25 students, nine administrators, two administrative staff

members, six research officers, two library staff members, and two alumni. Among the University Senate's enumerated powers outlined in the Rules of University Conduct is the responsibility to "promulgate a code of conduct for faculty, students, and staff and provide for its enforcement." The Senate Committee on the Rules of University Conduct, which at the moment I write includes two professors who appeared to participate in the rule-violating Columbia encampment, is responsible for proposing policies and passing them by a majority vote. The Senate Executive Committee is responsible for filling staggered vacancies on the University Judicial Board, a five-person panel that hears all cases on charges of policy violations, as well as an appellate body.

But embedded in the Rules of University Conduct are checks on the University Senate's power. The president retains "emergency authority to protect persons or property." Additionally, the president, upon consultation with a Senate panel, can decide whether "a demonstration poses a clear and present danger to persons, property, or the substantial functioning of any division of the University" and "take all necessary steps to secure the cooperation of external authorities to bring about the end of the disruption." And Columbia's Board of Trustees retains the ultimate control over the university.

Faced with a situation that the Senate was not working to remedy, where disruptive protests raged on campus every week and protesters repeatedly defied university policies, the administration stepped in, only to be rebuked by the faculty. This ongoing conflict amounts to a protracted power struggle that impairs not only the fulfillment of the university's mission but its ability to function at all.

The first major eruption along these lines began with the suspensions of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) in November 2023. After the two groups repeatedly refused to follow the university's time, place, and manner regulations on protests,

the administration's Special Committee on Campus Safety, which does not include students or faculty, handed down unilateral suspensions to the two student groups.

In response, about 100 faculty members and graduate students, some of whom walked out of their own classes, gathered to protest what they viewed as a violation of free speech. Weeks later, Gerald Rosberg, chairman of the Special Committee, spoke before the University Senate after senators criticized him for violating the Rules Committee's conception of the disciplinary process. Under intense scrutiny from senators, he conceded that the university may have gotten it wrong.

In spite of the suspensions, the situation on campus did not improve. Leaders of both organizations continued to orchestrate protests under the aegis of a large coalition of student groups called Columbia University Apartheid Divest. On February 19, 2024, the administration under former President Minouche Shafik issued an Interim Policy for Safe Demonstrations that modified the previous time, place, and manner guidelines and shortened the process for protest approval from 15 to two days. In theory, this interim policy was more favorable to demonstrators than what had previously existed. The demonstrators' defiance of the university's attempt to enforce time, place, and manner regulations effectively led the administration to reward them with looser regulations.

But the protesters did not respect the new rules. They would set up an encampment and blast amplified sound overnight next to first-year student housing. After the congressional hearing on campus antisemitism and accountability, Shafik made an executive decision to call in the police to arrest these protesters and clear the encampment. Yet, the same day, students who were not arrested set up another encampment on the opposite lawn, only yards from the first. The University Senate responded to the arrests by passing a

resolution that called for an investigation into Columbia’s leadership.

The new encampment lasted two weeks, until April 30, 2024, when a mob left their tents and illegally occupied Hamilton Hall. Shafik, with the support of the trustees, called in the NYPD again. The arrests made national news, but fewer people noticed what happened next. Just two and a half weeks after the arrests, the Columbia Arts and Sciences faculty passed a vote of no confidence in President Shafik with a 65 percent majority. She would step down in the summer.

In August, the University Senate approved a revision to the Guidelines to the Rules of University Conduct that softened time, place, and manner regulations. Instead of having to apply for approval, they wrote, student protesters, only “should provide notice” to the university of a planned demonstration by sending an email stating their intent to protest. One member of the Rules Committee identified its effort as a turn away from the enforcement measures used by the administration during the previous academic year.

Until recently, this language remained ambiguous and untested. But in the run-up to October 7, 2024, after a “Free Palestine” walkout commemorating the “Al-Aqsa Flood” was announced on social media, Interim President Katrina Armstrong wrote in a public message to the community that “this walkout was not registered through the process established by the Guidelines to the Rules of University Conduct and thus is not sanctioned by the University Senate or the University administration.” Her message underscored that Columbia retained the power to regulate the time, place, and manner of demonstrations.

But it wasn’t 12 hours before pressure from the Senate appeared to force her to modify her statement and curb the administration’s powers. Shortly after midnight, the language about the university’s role in sanctioning demonstrations was removed from Armstrong’s message. In an email sent an hour later to the Columbia community, the co-chair of the Senate’s Rules Committee reiterated the reduced

role of the university in managing the time, place, and manner of protests. “We want to confirm that the University does not sanction or unsanction protests,” he wrote. “Furthermore, the University Senate does not review, approve or sanction events or demonstrations.”

The next day, when the protesting mob ended up knocking over the barriers of their original protest pen and marching around campus, intimidating panicked Jewish students and disrupting classes with their noise, the university was not equipped to respond. This long-running battle over policymaking jurisdiction continues to embolden disruptors and result in chaos. It has made leadership at Columbia impossible.

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This broken leadership culture has become clear to me in my conversations with university leaders. One member of the Columbia administration told me that the biggest mistake the administration made throughout the 2023–2024 school year was to act, through the Special Committee on Campus Safety, to suspend SJP and JVP after they repeatedly violated campus demonstration policies. Student and faculty backlash stemmed, in part, from the belief that the Special Committee violated the principle of shared governance by arrogating power reserved for faculty- and student-controlled bodies. That backlash led the administrator with whom I spoke to believe that it would have been better to allow the groups to continue defying university policies than to take necessary action. Another high-ranking administrator involved in faculty affairs asserted to me, erroneously, that the University Senate and the Office of the President have equal power in Columbia’s governance hierarchy. This is simply untrue given the president’s powers to act unilaterally in an emergency situation.

The inaccuracy notwithstanding, the fact that leaders in our administration *believe* in this equal power dynamic displays just how

deeply a culture of disempowered leadership has penetrated Columbia. A disempowered administration leaves Jewish and pro-Israel students and professors—and other ethnic or ideological minorities—vulnerable to being tyrannized by some of Columbia’s most radical faculty members.

There could be no better illustration of the problem than the repeated faculty response to Shafik’s actions: When the former president did the one thing that most builds confidence in leaders—she took action to remedy a problem—the faculty swiftly responded by voting to express no confidence in her. It is as if the faculty were to say outright to the administration, “If you lead, we will reject you.”

In lieu of such leadership, it often sounds like our administrators are saying to students: “We cannot protect you, but you should still come here to learn.” This is an untenable status quo. The deal should be that students come to learn and the university protects their ability to do so, not their ability to disrupt others’ learning.



Where do we go from here?

The first step is to define what a university is, the parties that make it up, and the responsibilities each of those parties has in serving the institution’s purpose.

Universities are homes for the study of the essential liberal values and ideas of our society. But they are not democracies. University presidents and high-ranking administrators hold their roles to develop and safeguard a flourishing community of teaching, learning, and research. When leaders prove consistently incapable of ensuring a satisfactory learning environment—even after changes in personnel—it’s clear that deep, structural flaws are working against them. These flaws must be corrected. High-level university stakeholders, including Columbia’s trustees—the ultimate keepers of our

university—should seriously consider campus-governance reform with the objective of empowering strong executive leadership.

An initial step would be the formation of an independent committee to investigate the structural failures that have left Columbia students vulnerable, and the Columbia administration stuck in the mud, over the greater part of the past two years. This committee could include campus leaders from other universities that have been able to effectively ensure safe and productive campus learning environments, to share what they have learned. Once this committee publicly presents a report and recommendations, reform can begin, with the end goal of a community in which the character of our leaders matter as much as the title of their positions, and they can shape and suffuse our campus with their values.

Once university leaders are positioned to act on their values, rather than as figureheads, they should use their power to create a new covenant for their communities of learning. A university administration has a sacred responsibility to guarantee a physically safe and intellectually rigorous learning environment, in which students may not harass one another or otherwise shirk the civility appropriate to this community. Campus protests that violate the university's time, place, and manner regulations are not a free-speech issue; they violate content-neutral conduct policies. The language of the covenant must clearly distinguish when and where free speech crosses over into harassment and policy violations, and the administration must be prepared to enforce those lines by which all parties have agreed to abide.

This must apply to faculty and staff as well: Voluntarily entering this community means accepting its terms of discourse. The covenantal commitments should be written into contracts, and consequences for violating them should be applied swiftly, neutrally, and universally. There should be a price for engaging in behavior that

stifles free speech, the free exchange of ideas, and the kinds of curiosity and critical thinking that are meant to be the hallmarks of our education. University enforcement of student-conduct regulations do not stifle free speech; rather, they support the creation of an environment where free speech can be exercised in good faith.

Students need to fulfill our side of this covenant by committing to civil learning relationships with our teachers and peers. As a condition of entry into the university, we too must commit to engaging in good faith in our community of learning and to not disrupting its operation. Ensuring that everyone — administrators, faculty, staff, and students — lives up to this covenant is precisely what leaders should be able to use their power to accomplish. To get there, we need our executive leadership to have the power to move for positive, durable change in the first place. *