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On Campus

Get to Know Minouche Shafik, Columbia's Twentieth President

She's a top economist, an expert on international development, a baroness, and a global citizen. How will she lead Columbia?

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On July 1, Minouche Shafik '23HON became Columbia University's twentieth president, succeeding Lee C. Bollinger '71LAW, '02HON.

President Shafik, an Egyptian-born British-American economist who previously led the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), was raised in Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina and has earned degrees from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, LSE, and the University of Oxford. An expert on international development, Shafik began her career at the World Bank. She later served as permanent secretary of the UK's Department for International Development, as deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund, and as deputy governor of the Bank of England. She was appointed president of LSE in 2017.

This summer, just a month into her new position at Columbia, we spoke with President Shafik about her goals for the University and about how her background in global development might inform her leadership.

You've been at Columbia for just a few weeks. What are your impressions so far?

I've received an incredibly warm welcome on campus and an outpouring of lovely messages from alumni. Many of them have described how meaningful and transformative their time at Columbia was, and they've shared their hopes for its future. People have very strong feelings about this University. That's one of my big takeaways. There's something about this place that gets into people's hearts as well as their brains.

What made you decide to accept the presidency of Columbia? Was there anything specific that drew you here?

It was the combination of Columbia being an extraordinary institution — a place of enormous intellect, creativity, and achievement — and the fact that it's located in New York City. In part because of its location, Columbia is the most cosmopolitan, outward-looking, and global of the Ivies. And at a time when universities have a crucial role to play in addressing societal problems, I think that Columbia is positioned to be a tremendous force for positive change, in New York City and around the world.

The previous institution you led, LSE, is also among the world's most prestigious research universities. But it focuses mainly on the social sciences. What is it like for you to take the reins at a university whose programs span the full range of academic inquiry?

I'm really enjoying the transition, because I'm the type of person who gets a buzz out of learning new things. Columbia has science laboratories, medical clinics, art and architecture studios, engineering workshops, maker spaces, and startup facilities right in the middle of the city. I find that incredibly interesting and exciting.

You spent more than two decades managing international-development programs for some of the world's biggest financial institutions. What motivated you to do that work?

I've always been interested in why people become rich or poor, how social forces determine our chances of success in life, and how societies can be made fairer so that everybody has the same opportunities. I trace this back to my roots in Alexandria, Egypt, where I was born into a comfortable family in a society marked by severe inequality. I have vivid memories of being a young girl and visiting a rural village where my mother had relatives and noticing other children toiling in the fields rather than attending school. Seeing kids whose lives were so different from

mine confused me. Then my own family's prospects changed dramatically in the mid-1960s, when most of our land and property was seized by the Egyptian state as part of Nasser's nationalization program. We fled to the US — where my father had studied — with little money and few possessions. Suddenly I was an immigrant growing up in the American South during the desegregation era, amid explosive racial tensions. Those experiences had a profound effect on me, making me acutely aware of how our paths in life are influenced by where and when we're born and to what family.

Did this inspire you to study economics?

Yes. And it made me determined to put my knowledge to use in the field. I found the tangibility of international-development work extremely rewarding. Whether I was overseeing teams that were building schools in Africa, responding to floods in Southeast Asia, or helping Eastern European countries reform their economies after the fall of communism, I felt an emotional connection to the people whose lives were hanging in the balance. Economic and social policies never felt abstract to me. I knew that they could determine if children like those in my mother's village went to school, if families had enough food to eat, and if vulnerable people gained a sense of physical security, opportunity, freedom, and dignity.

So what made you decide to return to academia?

Throughout my career, I've straddled the fence between the world of ideas and the world of policy. For a long time, I was primarily a practitioner of economic policy, but I would regularly teach college courses, conduct research, and write books and papers. I always felt that the two endeavors were enriched by each other. Over time, though, I became convinced that the problems the world is facing today are so complex, and so pressing, that new ideas are needed to address them. Great universities like Columbia excel at generating new ideas.



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In your 2021 book *What We Owe Each Other*, you turn your attention to wealthy nations, arguing that they must fundamentally rethink how they provide childcare, education, and retirement benefits, among other social services. Can you explain the problem as you see it and the solutions that you envision?

The problem is that our current arrangements are no longer meeting people's needs, because they were designed nearly a century ago, when our lives looked very different. Until the late twentieth century, most women stayed at home to care for the young and the old, and men could expect to hold the same job for decades and then live only a few years after retiring. Now the majority of women in advanced economies are working outside the home, even as they continue to carry the bulk of their families' childcare responsibilities, which is constraining their efforts in both areas. Workers in many industries must continually learn new skills as a result of

rapid technological advances. And many people are spending a third or more of their lives in retirement, which is threatening the solvency of our pension systems, especially as birthrates decline and worker-to-retiree ratios drop. I argue that a whole host of new social policies and initiatives are needed to help families adjust to these changes and thrive.

Your book expresses a deep optimism about the power of ideas to shape the world. Yet putting academic ideas into practice is often difficult. Do you have a vision for promoting deeper connections between scholars and outside partners?

This is actually one of my primary goals at Columbia. I want to make it easier for academics to contribute to the public good. In my experience, most scholars, if given the opportunity to have an impact on the world, are eager to do so. But sometimes it's difficult to know who you should be dealing with outside the University, where to find the resources to support external collaborations, or how to carve out the time. I want to make all of that easier. I know that Columbia faculty and students are already doing an extraordinary amount of research that has the potential to improve the world. If the University can help them bring that knowledge into the public realm, the results will be transformative.

What else can you tell us about your goals as president?

I want to encourage fresh thinking about how Columbia University can contribute to the world at a moment when nationalism is on the rise in many countries, when the belief in science and other forms of expertise is being questioned by many people, and when social divisions between members of different income groups, races, and nationalities seem to be deepening. Supporting faculty and students who want to get their ideas out into the world will help, but there's more to it. I'd also like to see academics push back against the anti-intellectualism that has become pervasive in our culture and fight harder to restore public confidence in science, scholarship, and other forms of expertise. I think we can do this by improving the way we communicate about our work: emphasizing its public impact, speaking in simpler and clearer language, and educating people about the rigors of our scholarly methods while simultaneously being honest about the limits of our knowledge.

Just a few days before you arrived at Columbia, the US Supreme Court ruled that colleges can no longer make admissions decisions based on

race. What is your response to the ruling, and how might the University promote student diversity moving forward?

Clearly, we will comply with the law. But we'll also hold true to our values and find ways to ensure that students at Columbia continue to benefit from all the richness that human diversity brings. It's well-documented that diverse settings are optimal for learning and professional success, and that when we're in the company of people from different backgrounds we generate the most creative ideas, the greatest innovations, and the best outcomes for humanity. At Columbia, we recently convened a special group, led by the interim provost and including deans, that is using this as an opportunity not only to consider how to respond to the court's decision on affirmative action but to reassess all aspects of our admissions processes in a holistic way.

You're the first woman to lead Columbia, which is a point that many media outlets highlighted when your appointment was announced. Does that fact hold any significance for you?

I understand that my appointment was perceived as a milestone. But of course I don't wake up in the morning and think, "I'm the first woman to lead Columbia!" Rather, I'm focused on the work I have to do. I suppose my feeling is this: it was time.



President Shafik (right) with Sasha Wells ’18TC, executive director of the Roger Lehecka Double Discovery Center. (Diane Bondareff)

Do you have a personal leadership style or philosophy?

I subscribe to Nelson Mandela’s philosophy that you should lead from behind when you can, and as part of the team as often as possible. Occasionally, you need to step out in front and point an institution in a different direction. But most of the time, if you’re working with great people, you can allow your colleagues to flourish and take things where they need to go. I find that this works well at universities, where you’ve got immensely talented individuals all around you. The sixth-century BC Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu put it this way: “A leader is best when people barely know they exist … When the leader’s work is done, the people will say, ‘We did it ourselves.’”

In 2020, you were appointed to the UK’s House of Lords. What is your role as a baroness?

I was appointed as a “crossbench peer,” which means that I’m a politically neutral member who is situated in the chamber between the Conservative Party members

on one side and the Liberal Democrats and Labour Party members on the other. Crossbench peers are chosen for certain expertise they bring to the legislative process. Like all members of the House of Lords, you're appointed for life but are expected to attend parliamentary sessions, so I've taken a leave of absence while I lead Columbia.

Your husband, Raffael Jovine, is a molecular biologist, author, and entrepreneur. What is your intellectual partnership like?

Raffael is a fascinating person. He founded a company that uses algae to capture CO2 from the atmosphere. His passion is photosynthesis, and as a result we have many, many plants in our home. I like that he's in a completely different field from me. I think we're complementary — although he might say that he sometimes finds attending dinner parties with lots of economists a bit boring. [*Laughs*] We learn a lot from each other. We're always forwarding reading suggestions and sharing ideas. And we're extremely supportive of one another's interests. I think that's the key to a good relationship.

How are you and your family enjoying New York City so far?

There are so many things we like about New York. We're big theatergoers, and we love museums. The Morningside Heights neighborhood has been fun for us to explore — we've discovered Absolute Bagels, the Hungarian Pastry Shop, Tom's Diner. People at Columbia have been incredibly generous in providing tips about places to see. I must say that a big plus for Raffael and me is that we're now closer to our children. We have five grown children, four of whom are living in the US. I'm excited to be residing in the world's most vibrant city, leading a premier institution of higher learning. What more could you want in life?

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