On Campus

Bold Ideas, Real Impact

With the opening of the Manhattanville campus and the launch of an ambitious fundraising campaign, President Lee C. Bollinger says Columbia will have the space and resources to turn even more academic breakthroughs into real-world solutions. We asked him to describe a few of the exciting new initiatives that will enable the University to lead the way forward.

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Lee C. Bollinger (Eileen Barroso)

The University is a very different institution today than it was when you arrived in 2002, and there's certainly a new sense of energy and momentum on campus. How has Columbia changed in the time you've been here?

When I started at Columbia, I felt there were several matters of profound importance that had to be addressed. First and foremost was space. Universities need to grow

as knowledge grows, and there is a real relationship between space and academic distinction. Space allows intellectual life to expand and flourish. It frees up our capacity to think and imagine. When I proposed building a whole new campus in the Manhattanville section of West Harlem, the idea was that we needed space not only for the present but also for future decades. We had to go big to succeed.

The University also needed money and resources. Compared to the other prestigious institutions with which we compete, Columbia was financially stressed. Today, we're regularly ranked in the top US universities for annual fundraising. Our endowment may never match those of some wealthier institutions, but the gap is closing. And there are assets that Columbia enjoys that nobody else in the world has — most notably our location in New York City.

Of course, space, money, and resources are all related to our focus on academic quality. And we've worked hard on the quality of the institution. We've recruited many scholars who are at the very top of their fields, we've built a more culturally diverse faculty, and we've launched several new centers and institutes in areas like climate change, freedom of expression, and genetics.

Columbia is in a great place. There's no question that it is one of the top universities in the United States and in the world. And now we must build on these major achievements to do what we do best, which is to discover new knowledge, teach great students, and serve a wider public.

This emphasis on serving a wider public and solving real-world problems has been the focus of several recent initiatives.

Yes, this is something that matters enormously. Universities excel at discovering knowledge and teaching new generations, because we are organized in a very unusual way. No other institution recruits extremely talented and creative young people, gives them tenure for life after five or six years, and essentially allows them to explore and write and investigate things that interest them. It's a highly decentralized system that gives people a lot of autonomy, and it's been spectacularly successful over decades.

But the traditional structure of a university is not necessarily conducive to taking that knowledge and applying it to the outside world. You have to qualify that, of course, because there are certain parts of academia that do organize themselves around real-world applications and practice. Medicine is a key example. At Columbia,

we also have a number of programs, like the Earth Institute, that are designed to bring knowledge into the public sphere. And some faculty members have always viewed this as part of their life's work. But there's still a big distance between allowing those sorts of things to happen and accomplishing them systematically with deliberate intent.

One of my goals at Columbia has been to encourage groups of faculty from across the University to come together and apply their expertise to solving complex, real-world problems. Columbia World Projects, an initiative announced this spring, is designed specifically to support these types of endeavors. It will provide an administrative staff and infrastructure to help groups of faculty organize their academic research with outside partners to achieve specific goals on specific deadlines.

Could you tell us more about the type of projects this new initiative might undertake?

One of the first projects we're considering focuses on addressing the immediate impacts of climate change with climate adaptation. For example, Columbia's International Research Institute for Climate and Society currently has a project in Uruguay where scientists are working with the minister of agriculture and with farmers to provide climate monitoring and forecasting to help farmers anticipate and plan better for weather variability. We want to expand that effort by replicating it in other countries and possibly applying it in other sectors like public health. That's just one example of a major problem where we have intellectual leadership and can work with outside partners to have a real impact, in both the short and long term.

The Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University seems to be built on that same model. It's a partnership set up to identify a problem, affect policy, and create change.

Exactly, exactly. Its purpose is not only to do research and educate on the issue of freedom of speech and of the press in the digital age, but also to litigate. This is a joint project between the Knight Foundation, which is helping to fund the $60 million effort, and Columbia. Alberto Ibargüen, the president of the foundation, and I both recognized the need to protect and advance First Amendment rights in a constantly changing digital environment. This will involve helping news organizations and journalists define and fight for their rights in court. Litigating these cases can be

enormously expensive, and many traditional news organizations do not have the resources they once did to protect their rights. Meanwhile, many new-media outlets do not necessarily have the deeply held journalistic values or ethos that would prompt an organization to fight the government on issues of freedom of speech and of the press. So you need a richly endowed institute within a great university to take up these issues and to fight on everyone's behalf.

This spring, the University launched a five-year, five-billion-dollar fundraising campaign that follows closely on the heels of a record-breaking campaign that ended in 2013. What can you tell us about the decision to launch this new campaign at this moment?

Columbia cannot rest. There are so many important things to be done, so many areas of knowledge to be explored, so many students to educate. And again, Columbia, relative to its peers, has a greater need for philanthropic support.

Campaigns are not just about money, of course. They also prompt the University to organize its priorities and mobilize the efforts of alumni and others who want to be engaged. So they are beneficial in many ways.

But the bottom line is that Columbia has got to keep moving.

The new campaign is a little different from previous campaigns in that it focuses on interdisciplinary initiatives in areas like climate change, precision medicine, data science, neuroscience, and the arts.

Yes, exactly. One of the things that we've done very well at Columbia is identifying where knowledge is heading and then organizing our energies in a way that enables us to lead the way forward.

How important will alumni participation be to the new campaign?

One of the things that I'm most proud of is how alumni, parents, students, and others have become deeply engaged in the life of the University. Columbia has undertaken all kinds of efforts to make people feel more a part of this community, and the response has been wonderful. A capital campaign is an opportunity for everyone to get involved. And since the campaign is built around supporting truly groundbreaking new initiatives, I think all alumni will feel that excitement. I think all of us take pride in the ascendency of Columbia and in the impact that our faculty

and students are having out in the world. By participating in the capital campaign, everybody can play a role in ensuring that this work continues to happen.

We've seen an increasing number of gifts from people who are not alumni. What do you think is motivating these new donors to invest in Columbia?

I think it's proof of the intellectual powerhouse that exists here. People want to be part of it. And they believe that they can help improve the world by supporting an institution that is home to the most intellectually capable scholars and scientists. Columbia has certainly developed that reputation. I think everybody realizes that Columbia is an extremely exciting place, and they want to be involved in advancing its mission.

The campaign will also support ongoing commitments like student financial aid and faculty resources. What are your priorities in those areas?

I am very proud that Columbia has one of the most generous financial-aid programs in the world. At the College and the School of Engineering, we have a need-blind system of admissions, which means that undergraduates are admitted without regard to their ability to pay. In addition, undergraduates whose families earn less than $60,000 a year can come to the College or the School of Engineering for free, without taking out any loans. We're able to do this because alumni and others have given so generously in support of our financial-aid programs. We have an unending need for financial-aid money, both to sustain the College's and School of Engineering's need-blind admissions system and to offer better financial-aid packages to students in our professional schools and the School of General Studies. We can't stop raising money for financial aid. It's absolutely crucial if we are to live up to the principle that your educational opportunities should not be determined by the wealth of your family, and to maintain a socioeconomically diverse learning environment.

For faculty, one of our ongoing priorities is to improve their facilities. Columbia has opened several new buildings in recent years, but there are some older campus facilities that are in serious need of modernizing and repair. This is true especially for the buildings that house our basic-science departments on Morningside Heights. So raising money for physical renovations is very important.

Many people are deeply troubled by the current political climate in the US. When you spoke at the College's Hamilton Award Dinner this past winter,

you said that the Trump presidency represents “a challenge to the central idea of a university.” What did you mean by that?

We must always start from the premise that the University is not a political actor. I’ve said this on many occasions. As an institution, Columbia does not endorse candidates or take positions on most policy matters. There are many reasons for this. One is that if the University were to articulate an official position, it might intimidate people with different viewpoints from speaking freely on campus.

That is a sound principle. But like any principle, it doesn’t cover every possible circumstance. Columbia has its own values to protect: openness, diversity of opinion, and the cultural diversity of our students and faculty, to name a few. We think that affirmative-action policies are necessary to overcome America’s history of racial segregation and to create a great learning environment. When such policies are challenged in courts or in the political sphere, we believe that Columbia should participate in defending them — as I have done by participating in litigation and by speaking and writing on the topic. Another example is federal funding of science. We believe that the US government’s structure for supporting scientific inquiry is a good one, and so we will advocate for it.

We also fundamentally believe in scientific objectivity; in the pursuit of truth; in reason; and in recognizing the complexity of problems and trying to work through them. When a society begins to turn against these values, we at the University, in my view, have a responsibility to articulate and defend them in the public sphere. Of course, we know that things are constantly being said in the public sphere that are false, unreasonable, hostile, and mean. And we know that the University cannot insert itself into every such episode — we are not naive. But when the manipulation, deception, and distortion in public discourse rises to the level that we’ve seen in the past year, I think we at Columbia are not being political when we say: This is of deepest concern, and we will do our best to try to counteract it.

You’ve spoken out specifically against the Trump administration’s stances on immigration and refugees. What concrete actions is Columbia taking to ensure that international students and researchers feel safe here on campus?

The Trump administration’s executive orders on immigration have caused enormous distress for many, many students. We have seen a decline in applications from

international students, which is a phenomenon happening across the United States. We've had several instances of faculty from abroad not being able to get here for meetings or not wanting to risk coming. So there's no question this has had a deep effect on students and faculty. What we've done is to prepare for this as much as possible. The University is providing legal services to potentially affected students and trying to make it known to people around the world that Columbia remains open and that we want people to come here. I've also made public statements about this, signing letters and petitions that the Association of American Universities and others have issued denouncing the Trump administration's travel bans. And I have authorized the filing of amicus briefs by Columbia in support of lawsuits against the bans.

All indications are that federal support for science research and arts and humanities programs in higher education will be cut under President Trump. What could this mean for Columbia in practical terms, since nearly 80 percent of the University's $775 million annual research and development budget comes from government funds?

We are too early in the process to really know what will happen to the budgets, but if this were to happen, the effects could be devastating. The US system of higher education is one of the most successful at discovering new scientific knowledge. If you cut its funding by 10, 20, 30 percent, not only are you sowing chaos at Columbia, but you are undermining something that is a treasure for the world.

Your contract has been extended through 2022. At that point, you will have led Columbia for twenty years, making you the longest-serving Columbia president since Nicholas Murray Butler. Obviously you've had a profound impact on the institution. Are there ways that Columbia has changed you?

Oh, I have no doubt of that. It has widened my intellectual horizons in ways that I could not have imagined. Being a part of a great institution puts pressure on you to become a better person, because you are constantly learning and exposing yourself to new experiences and challenges in order to serve the institution better. Certainly this was true for me with globalization: I saw that there was something changing in the world that would soon transform research and teaching. And I knew that I needed to know more about how the world was becoming more interconnected in order to be an effective president. So, yes, it's had deep and abiding effects on me.

When people in the future discuss your legacy at Columbia, what do you hope they'll say?

I feel a deep connection to Columbia, and I have tried to do everything I possibly can to help it succeed. It's an amazing institution, and its potential is just enormous. You would expect me to say that — but I feel it every single day in an unusual and powerful way. If it could be said of me one day that I helped to unleash Columbia's potential, that would be the ultimate gratification.

The Columbia Commitment: A New Kind of Campaign

On May 11, Columbia University publicly launched an ambitious effort to raise funds and engage more alumni. We asked the campaign team to share five important facts about The Columbia Commitment.

1. **We're focusing on impact.** There are more ways than ever to give to Columbia and make a difference. The new campaign will have an impact beyond our campuses by supporting Columbia faculty and students who, often by working with outside partners, are developing solutions to major world problems.

2. **Our commitments are University-wide.** Much of this impact-driven work is happening through our commitment to interdisciplinary research in certain leadership areas. These commitments currently include: Arts and Ideas, Climate Response, Data and Society, The Future of Neuroscience, Global Solutions, Just Societies, and Precision Medicine.

3. **This campaign is for everyone.** Along with "impact giving," the University is amplifying efforts at every school to support the human talent that makes progress possible. Raising money for faculty and students, and being able to offer significant research funding and financial aid, are more important than ever.

4. **Columbia has real momentum.** President Bollinger has said, "Columbia cannot rest." There is too much to be done. This campaign is the most accelerated ever. It seeks to raise five billion dollars in five years, the most ambitious year-to-year goal in University history.

5. **We can all help.** People can contribute at any level, with fifty dollars for a project or school fund of their choice, or with a multimillion-dollar endowment to support one of Columbia's schools or institutes. From attending an event to sharing Columbia content on social media to telling your story on ColumbiaYou, there are more ways than ever to join the dialogue and have an impact, not only at your school but also across the entire University.

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