

Dean's Remarks:

J.D. Orientation—Class of 2027

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Thank you very much for the warm welcome, Dean Saavedra. I also look forward to working with President Morote, and our great student leaders in the coming year.

It is my great privilege to be among the first to welcome you, the Columbia Law School J.D. Class of 2027!

As Dean Saavedra mentioned, I also am beginning my Columbia Law School journey. Like many of you, I am still settling into life in New York City and at Columbia Law School, our new academic home. And just so you know I'm not embellishing the point, my first day on the job as Dean was 19 days ago.

This means that we are newcomers. Despite our collective experience and knowledge, there is much we don't know. And there is much that we have yet to learn. But I believe our newness will bind us together—not just this year, as we take this first step together, but as lifelong Columbians.

I feel very proud to count myself as an honorary member of this incoming class. I asked Dean Iwerebon just now and she (reluctantly) agreed to grant me admission.

But, even though your pathways up until this point have varied widely, you all come to Columbia with one thing in common: an overriding desire to gain mastery of the law in a rigorous intellectual environment marked by the pursuit of excellence.

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You might wish to use your legal training in different ways, but you are all here to learn—to understand how the law works, how it is applied, and how it can advance the goal of creating a more just world.

Have no doubt, you have come to the right place.

Columbia Law School has a proud tradition of being a training ground for world-renowned, innovative, and field-defining lawyers and legal scholars. The sheer breadth of the learning opportunities to which you will have access is simply astounding.

You will take classes with some of the world's leading legal thinkers, scholars, and practitioners. You will develop and apply your lawyering skills in the community. You will connect with classmates who have common interests, and discover new ambitions and intellectual interests. And you will be exposed to a network of alumni practicing law at the highest levels around the world.

I first became acquainted with Columbia Law School because of the work of path breaking scholars who helped to shape the fields of foreign relations law and public international law—areas that have been at the center of my own research and writing for the past two decades.

You are now part of that enduring and distinguished tradition. I am proud to join you as well. And that brings me to the second thing you have in common. As of today, each and every one of you are members of this extraordinary Columbia Law School community.

I think that deserves a round of applause!

Now, I'm not sure about you, but when I found out that I would be coming to Columbia, I knew I would have to brush up on my trivia about Columbia University and our Law School.

I have learned, for instance, that Columbia's student-run radio station, WKCR, is the oldest FM station in the world. Apparently, this owes to the fact that FM radio was invented right here on campus, in the basement of Philosophy Hall, by an electrical engineer named Edwin Armstrong. Why the electrical engineer was working in Philosophy Hall remains a mystery!

I have learned that before he was known as “The Iron Horse”, the famed Major League Baseball player Lou Gherig was called “Columbia Lou”. He played on the lawn where Butler Library now stands, and once hit a home run that landed in the Journalism building.

Have you seen the monumental bronze statue outside of the Law School’s Jerome Greene Hall, which depicts the mythical human figure Bellerophon taming the wild horse Pegasus? I learned that it is the second-largest metal sculpture in New York City...behind only the Statue of Liberty.

I am planning to keep these facts in my back pocket in case I decide to join a pub trivia team.

These bits of Columbia lore that I just shared with you each have to do with the physical architecture of our campus—the brick and stone and mortar that comprise the built environment that we will share. But what I want to talk to you about today is a different type of campus architecture, the *intellectual* architecture that makes a University like Columbia distinctive in its pursuit of knowledge.

What do I mean by this?

Beneath the teaching, learning, and discovery that take place at Columbia Law School each day, there exists a substructure—a foundational set of common values that have been tested, honed, and strengthened over more than a century and a half.

And it is this intellectual architecture that enables Columbia Law School to effectively train all of you—the future leaders of our society—to lead with purpose and empathy, with rigor and care, and with a fierce commitment to pursuing the truth no matter where it leads.

As we begin our time at Columbia Law School, I want to take a moment to speak directly to what I see as those underpinning values—values that I hope will be our proverbial North Star in the years ahead.

First, we must foster conditions that enable free expression and the exchange of ideas—fundamental tenets that are simply essential in the pursuit of knowledge. This means that we must grant one another the widest possible latitude to test new ideas, some of which will inevitably come into contestation and conflict with one another.

It is through this kind of open discussion, debate, and even passionate disagreement that we are able to understand the views of others, to strengthen our own ideas, and, at times, to even change our minds.

If we are doing our jobs here at Columbia Law School, you will feel some measure of discomfort as you encounter ideas and perspectives that are different from your own. This productive discomfort is by design, and when you experience it, I encourage you to begin from a place of good faith.

Why good faith? As we begin to learn, we may be using new language or expressing ideas that are not fully formed as we work to clarify our own thinking. This is even more true as we learn to interact across cultural, linguistic, and experiential differences. We will always respect law and policies prohibiting discrimination, but I believe that Columbia Law School can transcend difference and model a discourse of deep intellectual engagement and debate in an environment of mutual respect and civility.

So, rather than rushing to judgment or foreclosing further discussion or even rejecting the possibility of friendship, I ask you, the future leaders of the Law School and society, to seek to understand and engage others who have views different from your own. You will be better for it, and you will have contributed to making Columbia a place where ideas, dialogue, and constructive engagement are central to our mission.

Second, it is not enough to say that we embrace free expression and are welcoming and respectful of a wide range of viewpoints. We must act affirmatively to create the space for dissent, disagreement, and even protest.

In 2018, Columbia's University Senate affirmed that "all members of the Columbia community have the freedom to disagree with conventional wisdom, with one another, and with official policies whether institutional, local, national, or global."

But this freedom to disagree is not absolute. It goes hand-in-glove with a responsibility to listen, and to engage—not only with curiosity, but with civility toward one another.

Third, while we respect the right of others to express their dissent and engage in protest, the freedom to disagree exists within a framework that respects reasonable restrictions on the time, place, and manner of such actions.

Why? Because Columbia is fundamentally a truth-seeking institution, and no truth-seeking institution can be one in which protest impedes the ability to carry out the critical activities necessary to achieve that research, educational, and experiential mission.

I have a responsibility to you, as Dean, to create an environment in which views can be expressed freely without impeding the rights of others to be heard, to attend class, to study, and to pursue the activities that make Columbia Law School an extraordinary place to learn.

By virtue of being a member of this incredible Columbia community, you have the privilege of learning from outstanding faculty, students, and staff. But you also have a responsibility to abide by the rules and norms that allow our distinctive intellectual environment to flourish.

Finally, the fourth element of our intellectual architecture is the role of institutional speech itself. Our core purpose—our aspirational North Star—is to engage in path breaking research and to provide a transformative education in the continuous pursuit of knowledge and truth. That’s what we will always strive to do. Given this purpose, this distinctive mission, what is the role of institutional speech? How should it foster our mission?

I am sure you have attended institutions where the president or dean has issued a statement on a political or social issue. Maybe you agreed with the statement, maybe you disagreed, and maybe you wondered why a statement was issued in the first place. You also may have heard of the term “institutional neutrality.”

Institutional neutrality generally stands for the proposition that universities should not take positions on political and social issues unless the issue directly affects the mission of the university, its core function, and its commitment to open inquiry and free expression. Institutional neutrality dramatically limits the instances in which the institution speaks, while enabling and empowering faculty and students to express their views as individuals.

Institutional neutrality makes clear that an institution—Columbia Law School, for example—will not tell its faculty or students which ideas to explore, which topics to discuss, which opinions to express, or what views to reject. Faculty and students can share their perspectives in an environment that values open inquiry and expression, without concern that their views may be in tension with some “institutional” position on the issue.

Importantly, institutional neutrality should not imply that the institution, in and of itself, cannot speak under any circumstances. In fact, quite the opposite. We act affirmatively to advance the values that are fundamental to the core mission of the university like free expression, open inquiry, and respect for diverse viewpoints in an environment free from discrimination. But apart from that narrow and principled exception, the institution would not issue statements on political or social issues.

When I think about our research and teaching mission and our commitment to your learning, I believe that the intellectual architecture I have described is critical to Columbia Law School's enduring greatness. And my responsibility as Dean—Dean for the entire community—is making sure that the values that underpin this intellectual architecture continue to flourish.

During your time with us, I strongly encourage you to model these values and principles. As members of the Law School community, we are uniquely situated to set the standard of engagement—both in times of calm, and in times of crisis—to be the example that others follow. We can be the model, and you can be the leaders.

These values will inevitably be challenged. When that moment comes, I believe you will rise to the occasion and uphold them with a seriousness of purpose and belief in Columbia's special mission.

I hope this gives you a sense of the values that I carry with me—and my faith in all of you. I look forward to partnering with all of you in the coming years to realize our shared aspirations for this exceptional institution we now share.

Now, before I conclude, let me offer one final thought:

One of the reasons I came to Columbia Law School is because I believe in the positive—even transformational—impact this institution can have on both individuals and the world at large. And, it is true: We want to set the bar high for you—Columbians strive to do big things.

But we also want to support you on your journey. Our faculty, staff, and alumni in the legal profession stand ready to welcome and help guide you. Do not be afraid to seek them out.

Likewise, if you see a classmate in need, reach out your hand in support. I also encourage you to find ways to support and enrich this community. Join student organizations, participate in service projects, and lend your voice to causes you care about. Remember, the legal profession is rooted in helping others, both individually and in service of a well-governed society.

To the J.D. Class of 2027: I know that the next three years will be among the best and most stimulating of your lives. Columbia will become part of your personal DNA, and let me say once again how thrilled I am to be starting my own Columbia journey by your side.

Thank you, and I wish you all the best.

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