

Columbia Policy Institute Annual Report

2023 - 2024



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Introduction & Summary

The Columbia Policy Institute is Columbia's leading student-run public policy think tank. We advance progressive values at all levels where policy decisions are made, with a particular focus on creating change on Columbia's campus and in the New York City community. We strive to bring historically marginalized identities into the policy-making process.

The 2023-2024 academic year was one of immense growth for our organization. The club expanded its members and reach significantly, with 124 voting members by the end of the year and dozens of other students touched by our programming. The Institute also turned the DC Trip from a bi-annual to an annual trip in order to reach more students, published a record 35 articles in the *Columbia Policy Journal*, and expanded our connections with other student organizations.

This year our Policy Centers pursued impactful research and advocacy agendas to better our campus and community. The Human Rights Center applied pressure to the University to end legacy admissions and dove into the library archives to produce a report on transgender healthcare at Columbia. The Education Center created three full lesson plans for training education advocates. Energy and Environment submitted a complaint to the NY Attorney General detailing how Columbia's fossil fuel investments violate its non-profit duties. In the revived Foreign Policy Center, research teams wrote detailed reports on the Columbia Global Centers and the Economic Development Center continued to advocate for inclusive housing policy, including a historical report on Columbia's impact on the surrounding neighborhood. The Technology Center published an open access repository for data about Columbia in order to bolster transparency. Finally, the Healthcare Center focused its efforts on providing information to students about reacting to a positive COVID-19 diagnosis, finding free menstrual products, and accessing mental health support. Read on for further details about all these initiatives from our Policy Centers..

These projects were accomplished during a tumultuous year at Columbia. Navigating campus and world politics about Palestine and Israel, the Columbia Policy Institute took steps unique in our history. In addition to joining the Columbia University Apartheid Divest coalition, the Institute released two statements condemning the administration's responses to pro-Palestine protests. The Institute, and many of our individual members, continue to support progressive activism on this issue.

Finally, in an effort to document our impact on the Columbia and surrounding community, this constitutes the Columbia Policy Institute's second annual report. In addition to this report, we added to the archive of CPI documents within the Columbia University Libraries. Beyond the recent challenges to the Columbia community that our organization's leadership has had to navigate, this club has maintained an active and substantial membership through the

COVID-19 pandemic and our disaffiliation and rebranding last year; these upheavals make apparent the importance of preserving our institutional memory. Moreover, public reporting of our work increases transparency, accountability, and recognition for all that our members do.

We are deeply grateful for the drive, work, and visions of our leaders and members who have poured countless hours into our Policy Center projects, the DC trip, the Journal, and our GBMs. We have always striven to transform abstract progressive ideals into actionable projects and concrete realities. We remain the hub of successful and effective progressive policy work on Columbia's campus, and we are excited to continue this mission for years to come.

Our Board

President: Matthew Ruppert

Vice President: Soham Mehta

Journal Director: Isabel Coberly

Secretary: Carrie Crespino

Treasurer: Alicia Lopez-Guerra

Outreach Director: Kira Ferdyn

Deputy Journal Director: Fatimah Khan

Economic Development Center Director: Marie Miller & Rose Li

Education Center Director: Jorge Hernandez-Perez

Energy & Environment Center Director: Savannah Jones & Nicole Xiao

Foreign Policy Center Director: Avian Muñoz

Healthcare Center Director: Kathan Reddy

Human Rights Center Director: Charlie Hoskins & Glynis O'Meara

Technology Center Director: Daniel Luce

Policy Centers

Economic Development Policy Center

Directors: Marie Miller and Rose Li

Housing advocacy | Rent-controlled housing letter | Socio-economic impact report

The Economic Development Center continues its ongoing focus of building partnerships with local tenants' rights and housing equity organizations, seeking to hold Columbia accountable for its role as an impeding neighbor and landlord in the Morningside Heights area. Columbia has long been a key figure in obstructing affordable housing and ousting locally owned small businesses from the area. Our projects this year have included writing an open letter for newly inaugurated President Shafik to expand rent-controlled housing for unaffiliated tenants, holding a panel alongside the Morningside Heights Community Coalition (MHCC) and Broadway Inc., and producing both a statistical evaluation of Columbia-driven socioeconomic shifts in the neighborhood and a local legal history report on cases involving eminent domain.

Education Policy Center

Director: Jorge Hernandez-Perez

Education advocacy lesson plans | Open letter to support University funded child care

The Education Center is working to foster consciousness about the opportunity gap while simultaneously making advocacy knowledge accessible to students, educators, and parents. Center members conducted extensive literature reviews on the drivers of educational disparities and successful policy interventions, and they turned their scholarship into “lesson plans.” Lessons will be distributed and made accessible to future parent and teacher education advocates—both via a network more familiar to teachers, the American Federation of Teachers’ “Share My Lesson,” and via the Columbia Policy Institute’s website.

The Center has cooperated with other student organizations to co-host panel events throughout the semester that advance its consciousness-raising mission. We have also drafted an open letter to the Columbia University administration demanding that it increase funds to, and thus lower the tuition of, university-affiliated child care centers. In all of the Center’s research and community-facing work, education equity remains a firm foundation.

Energy & Environment Policy Center

Directors: Savannah Jones and Nicole Xiao

Sustainability advocacy | Fossil fuel investment complaint to Attorney General

This year, the Energy & Environment Center has continued a series of discussions with the administration in five areas of student sustainability concerns: building efficiency, water use,

energy sourcing, divestment, and fossil fuel-free research. We have pushed for firmer emissions targets, sustainability initiatives, and the elimination of fossil fuel funding sources for University research in these engagements. Additionally, the Energy & Environment Center has spent this past semester investigating Columbia's endowment exposure to fossil fuel investments, researching and writing an extensive report on the University's potential violations of the Uniform Prudent Management of Institutional Funds Act (UPMIFA). This was submitted as a formal complaint to the New York State Attorney General.

Foreign Policy Center

Director: Avian Muñoz

Policy reports on Columbia Global Centers | Femicide in Nairobi | Clean energy in Europe | Transparency in the Middle East | U.S.-China Relations in Beijing

The Foreign Policy Center launched four exciting projects with Columbia's Global Centers which will culminate in robust research reports and ongoing activism initiatives. The Kenya team has been working with administrators at the Nairobi Global Center and NGO activists in East Africa to build an awareness campaign around the ongoing issue of femicide disproportionately affecting college-aged women. The Europe team is building a database and pursuing research to analyze clean energy initiatives throughout Columbia's properties in Western Europe. The Middle East team is working to call for more transparency from administrators involved in the opening of the Tel Aviv Global Center. The China team is pursuing a report to connect the role of Columbia's Global Center in Beijing with efforts to improve U.S.-China relations.

Healthcare Policy Center

Director: Kathan Reddy

COVID-19 toolkit for students | Menstrual product accessibility

This year, the Healthcare Center has focused on a number of projects concerning COVID-19 on campus and access to sexual and mental health services. Our members first put together a digital "COVID-19 Toolkit," a resource guide to support students that are getting sick and overwhelmed with everything to do—namely figuring out dorm quarantine measures, access to meals, free COVID testing, and emails to professors for course accommodations, in addition to vaccination planning. In coordination with administrators at Columbia and Barnard health services and facilities, we've also advocated for improved access to menstrual products in campus bathrooms, including online maps with bathroom locations, more visible signage, and QR codes for refill reporting. We're currently exploring ways feedback policies could be implemented into Columbia and Barnard's new medicated abortion services. As far as mental health resources go, the Healthcare Center is pushing for all student ID cards to be printed with hotlines such as Columbia Psychological Services, Furman Counseling Center, Sexual Violence Response, and Nightline.

Human Rights Policy Center

Directors: Charlie Hoskins and Glynis O'Meara

Ending legacy admissions | History of LGBTQ healthcare at Columbia

This school year, the Human Rights Center has focused on two main projects: one to research the history of LGBTQ healthcare access and activism at Columbia, and one to push for the end of legacy admissions at Columbia and across the Ivy League. The LGBTQ research project has been based on archived issues of campus publications dating back to the 1980s as well as the Columbia Archives and supplemented by original interviews of queer and trans Columbia alumni. The project ultimately produced a research report on the timeline of LGBTQ activism at Columbia as well as a top-sheet summary of what strategies were most successful for LGBTQ activists at Columbia over time. The legacy project centered around drafting and publishing an open letter to Columbia's working group on admissions legacy co-signed by 15 student groups which demanded an end to legacy admissions. The project has also published an op-ed in the Columbia Spectator on the same topic and worked to support a cross-school coalition to end legacy admissions.

Technology Policy Center

Director: Daniel Luce

Improving accessibility of Columbia data | Study of QR code risk

Over the past year, the Technology Center has focused on two primary initiatives aimed at enhancing data accessibility and investigating emerging privacy concerns on campus. We have diligently worked on acquiring, cleaning, and organizing existing Columbia University data for our user-friendly, open-source, and open-access database hosted on GitHub. This repository will serve as a valuable public resource for students and aims to foster transparency and collaboration in data-driven policy discussions. Additionally, we have spearheaded a comprehensive study to understand the utilization of QR codes and address the associated risks to data privacy.

DC Trip

From November 2 to November 6, we hosted a 54 person trip to Washington D.C. to meet with representatives from 12 policy-related organizations. The trip exposed its participants to a variety of avenues through which they could engage in progressive public policy work, either in internships or full-time employment. Hosting a DC Trip this year marked a shift for the Institute by turning the trip from a bi-annual to an annual event. The organizations we visited were:

- Atlantic Council
- CATO Institute
- Foreign Policy Magazine
- America's Essential Hospitals
- Bipartisan Policy Center
- LGBTQ Victory Institute
- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
- Office of Senator Amy Klobuchar
- Center for American Progress
- Office of the Federal Public Defender for the District of Columbia
- World Wildlife Fund
- National Academy of Public Administration

In order to ensure the financial accessibility of the trip, the Institute covered all travel, lodging, and meals for every participant, leading the trip to reach a total cost of \$28,500. We are deeply grateful for the financial support and assistance of the organizations at Columbia that helped fund our trip:

- Joint Council Finance Committee
- Eric H. Holder Jr. Initiative for Civil and Political Rights
- Student Governing Board
- Columbia College Travel Fund

Conversations & Events

This year the Institute continued to host general body meetings (GBMs) every Tuesday night, where the topics of these conversations ranged from affirmative action to water policy in the American west. Discussion titles included:

- Affirmative Action is Over. What's Next?
- Assessing the Sustainable Development Goals: Why aren't they Working?
- Childproofing the Internet: a discussion of social media age restrictions amidst the teen mental health crisis
- Accessible Democracy: The Pros and Cons of Biometric Voter Registration
- To Soup or Not to Soup? Effective Protest Tactics for the Climate Movement
- To USAID or US-Harm? Geostrategic and Human Rights-related Controversies in the U.S. International Economic Development Programming.
- Should K-12 Private Schools Exist?
- The Ethics of Euthanasia: Discussing Canada's MAID Bill and Assisted Dying Legislation in the US
- Autonomous Vehicles and the Shaping of Tomorrow's Transportation
- NYC Zoning: Building Where, and For Whom?
- Balancing Tribal Rights and Environmental Land Use
- Assessing Immigration Policy: Reuniting Families and Opening Borders?
- Medicare for All: Costs, Benefits, and Human Rights
- TikTok Stan or TikTok Ban?
- Water Shopping: Water Policies in the American West
- Changes to Voting Age: What Makes an Eligible Voter?

We also used our GBM times to host a few panels and presentations. These included:

- Local Campaigns in Housing Justice: A Panel Discussion of Columbia's Role in the NYC Housing Crisis; with representatives the Morningside Heights Community Coalition and the JUST Housing Committee, and Broadway Community Inc.
- Anti-Gatekeeping Panel; with Columbia Policy Institute Upperclassman and Alumni
- From GHAP to Trump: A History of Trans Rights at Columbia; presentation of a Human Rights Policy Center report
- Columbia Policy Journal Writing Workshop

The Institute also hosted special events for bonding and community service. These included:

- Multiple parties in East Campus
- Gingerbread Gerrymandering
- Sandwich Making for the Housing Equity Project's Direct Outreach Program, twice
- Trivia Night
- Journal Launch

Publications

Volume II of the *Columbia Policy Journal* featured a record number of 35 policy memos, from our largest-ever pool of writers. Authors wrote on issues as varied as election efficiency, flood mitigation infrastructure, and the accessibility of video visits in prisons.

Our Policy Centers also published op-eds in the *Columbia Daily Spectator* in support of their advocacy work:

- Economic Development Center. “Breaking from Bollinger’s tendency toward evasion, Shafik plans to meet with Morningside Heights housing justice organizations. Here’s what we have to say.” *Columbia Daily Spectator*. October 10, 2023.
- Human Rights Center. “Columbia is failing to meet its equitable admissions commitments.” *Columbia Daily Spectator*. March 5, 2024.

Additionally, our Policy Centers produced a number of research reports and open letters that simultaneously contribute to knowledge production in key areas and contribute to progressive advocacy. These works, listed below, can be read on the Institute website or in the Columbia library archives.

- “From the AIDS Crisis to the Trump Era: A History of Transgender Rights and Healthcare at Columbia, 1985-2020.” By the Human Rights Center.
- “Tompkins Hall Open Letter” demanding a reduction in the tuition fees of the aforementioned childcare center. By the Education Center, co-signed by an additional 15 Columbia student organizations.
- “Overcoming Gender-Based Violence in Kenya: In Collaboration With The Nairobi Global Center.” By Claire Thornhill, Nina Debry, and Logan Septhon of the Foreign Policy Center.
- “Legacy Admissions Open Letter” to the Working Group on Columbia Admissions Policy demanding an end to legacy admissions. By the Human Rights Center, co-signed by an additional 14 Columbia student organizations.
- “Knowledge Diplomacy Through Educational Transparency: The Columbia Global Center in Beijing.” By Quinn Morris, Kelsey Wu, Tiffany Pham, Salima Barrow, and Heidi Small of the Foreign Policy Center.
- A Lesson Plan on “Understanding School Funding Mechanisms and Their Impacts on Teacher Quality.” By Yunseo Kim, Cora Cole, Roselyn Rojas Rodriguez, Jorge Hernandez-Perez, and Nori Leybengrub of the Education Center.
- A Lesson Plan on “An Opportunity Gap or an Achievement Gap?” By Viviana Flores, Shanthi Ashok, Sarah Park, Rebeca Lopez-Anzures, Drew Reetz, Jorge Hernandez-Perez, and Nori Leybengrub of the Education Center.

- A Lesson Plan on “Housing Policy is Education Policy.” By Katherine Grivkov, Lily Ouellet, Spencer Davimos, Erin Torres, Ruby Perez, Jorge Hernandez-Perez, and Nori Leybengrub of the Education Center.
- “COVID-19 Toolkit.” By the Healthcare Center.
- “A History of Local Socioeconomic Harm Brought About by Columbia University.” By the Economic Development Center.
- A formal complaint to New York State Attorney General Letitia James alleging that Columbia’s continued investments in fossil fuel companies and ongoing reception of donations from such companies violates their fiduciary duties. By the Energy and Environment Center.

Finally, the Energy and Environment Center’s complaint to the NY Attorney General was the subject of an article in *The Guardian*, with comments by Co-Center Director Nicole Xiao:

- Dharna Noor. “Students at US universities file legal complaints over fossil fuel investments.” *The Guardian*. April 22, 2024.

Statements

During the course of the academic year, the 2023-2024 Columbia Policy Institute board put out two statements related to pro-Palestinian activism on campus. On November 29, 2023 the Institute announced that it would join the Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD) coalition. At the same time, the Institute released the following statement in response to the University's decision to suspend the student groups Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP):

"We are deeply concerned by the University's decision to sanction the leading campus voices for Palestinian liberation. As student leaders, we know that University policy on student groups is not enforced with uniform vigor. Targeting only one side of this debate appears to be an attempt to silence speech critical of the University and is a wrongful suppression of academic freedom. In a time of grief and crisis for Palestinians, in Gaza and on campus, the decision to suspend these groups only compounds our fellow students' pain.

As has been reported, the already convoluted events policy was arbitrarily changed without proper communication in the buildup to SJP and JVP's peaceful protest on November 9. The Columbia Policy Institute is particularly concerned with the University administrator's decision to grant themselves sole discretion over student group sanctions and derecognition without the opportunity for appeal. The decision to suspend SJP and JVP, regardless of its allowability under these new rules, is unjust and unreasonable. It puts an unreasonable burden on political speech, is disproportionate to the alleged offense, is inconsistent with past enforcement of event policy, and lacks compassion and empathy for students deeply affected by recent events. It demonstrates that the University administration is unwilling to tolerate criticism from its students—a wrongful and dangerous precedent.

Therefore, we demand an immediate return to the earlier event policies and the inclusion of student representatives in any future processes to change said policies. Most importantly, we join dozens of fellow student groups, hundreds of faculty members, numerous alumni, and over twenty elected officials to demand that the Columbia University administration reverse the suspension of SJP and JVP."

On April 21, 2024, the Institute released a second statement in reaction to the University's decision to invite the New York Police Department onto campus on April 18 in order to dismantle CUAD's encampment on the South Lawn and arrest student activists within it. The statement reads as follows:

"The Columbia Policy Institute is horrified and disappointed by President Shafik's decision to bring the NYPD onto our campus and arrest over 100 of our classmates engaged in a peaceful

protest. By no accounts were the students camped outside Butler engaged in any activity that would reasonably warrant such an egregious response. Ironically, the University's decision to intimidate and violently suppress nonviolent expression actively presents more risks to students. This choice tramples on the values of free speech and academic freedom that Columbia purportedly enshrines, and obliterates any shred of remaining trust between the student body and the administration. Furthermore, we denounce the suspension of student activists without due process by both Barnard and Columbia and unequivocally condemn the cruel decision to deprive these students of access to housing and food. Denying students' rights to basic necessities once again endangers the very people our University promises to protect. CPI denounces these violations of human rights in the strongest possible terms.

At CPI, we firmly believe that the university should be a place where students and faculty can freely engage with complex issues, and that student dialogue and activism are critical for the betterment of our campus and our world. Although the University has instead violently silenced dissent, we applaud the students, professors, student governing bodies, and fellow student groups who continue to demand to be heard in the pursuit of justice. In solidarity with the ongoing protests, we reaffirm our commitment to Columbia University Apartheid Divest and our support for the coalition's demands. We wish to amplify, in particular, the new demand to drop all criminal charges, suspensions, and other punishments against student protestors."

Both statements, as well as our decision to join CUAD, were voted on anonymously and approved by a non-unanimous majority of the Board.