

Dean's Remarks:
J.D. Orientation—Class of 2029
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Thank you, President Brunner. I look forward to working with you and your fellow student leaders in the coming year. I also want to express my gratitude to Dean Iwerebon and the Admissions Office for bringing all of you here to Columbia Law School. And to Dean Saavedra and her team in Student Services for their work in planning this week's orientation. Let's give them a round of applause!

Dean Iwerebon did an excellent job of truly celebrating your many talents and accomplishments. It could not be clearer that this is a group of exceptional individuals. Individuals who hail from around the country and the world. Individuals who represent wildly different backgrounds and life experiences. Individuals who have come to Columbia with an overriding desire to gain mastery of the law and make an impact in the world.

Up until now, this is exactly how we have known you. As individuals. But, beginning today, you are no longer just individuals. You are the Columbia Law School J.D. Class of 2029. And it is one of the great perks of my job as Dean to welcome you as you begin your Columbia Law School journey. Congratulations!

This being your first day of law school, I want to start with a rhetorical question. If I asked each of you to say what comes to mind when you hear the word "law", what would you say?

I bet I would hear a range of responses. Some of you might name things like "justice," "equality," "human rights," "fairness," or "equal representation." Some of you might say things like "constitution," "statute," "trial," "court," or "contract."

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There is, of course, no right answer. But I do think there is a useful distinction to be drawn between the first category, which I will call principles, and the second category, which I will call practices.

Principles are ideals. They tend to endure over time. They anchor us. And, ideally, they are simple and straightforward. Think of those famous rights enumerated by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Practices, while they flow from principles, are different. They are tools and techniques; mechanisms for implementation. They change over time, often to reflect the challenges and realities of the day. Think about the U.S. Constitution and the way it prescribes specific duties and guardrails for each of the three branches of the federal government.

Put simply, principles tell us what matters. Practices are how principles become real.

They work in concert, but one cannot work in isolation from the other. Principles without practices are mere aspirations; empty platitudes unmoored from reality.

For example: We believe in equality. But equality can mean equal treatment, equal opportunity, equal access, or something else entirely. The law has spent generations wrestling with what equality requires in particular circumstances.

The same is true in the other direction, too. Practices without principles are merely tactics; rules and regulations that serve a means without a clear end.

How many of you have had to jump through a seemingly inane bureaucratic hoop, or a long chain of perfunctory approvals, without understanding why it was required or what aims it was advancing. Let me assure you that Columbia Law School wants to reduce that burden on all of us!

You get the idea. But there is a deeper insight here that I want to convey: A principle has little power unless we know how to put it into practice, and a practice has little meaning unless we understand the principle it serves.

Here at the Law School, there are some principles that guide our work. And I want to spend a few moments today talking about two of them and how we put them into practice.

The first principle is free expression.

As one of the world's leading institutions of higher learning, our North Star is to advance knowledge and seek truth—no matter where it lies. We aim to teach you how to think, not what to think.

How do we advance this principle?

We provide faculty and students with the latitude to discuss and debate issues openly—and to disagree, sometimes even passionately. We can disagree with one another. We can disagree about politics—locally, nationally, and globally. We can even disagree about positions and policies taken right here at this University.

This kind of environment helps us to understand the views of others, to strengthen our own arguments, and, at times, to even change our minds. It also reinforces the ideas, dialogue, and constructive engagement are non-negotiable parts of life at the Law School.

But it is not sufficient to simply say that we embrace free expression and welcome a wide range of viewpoints. We must create the space for dissent, disagreement, and, within our rules, even protest. Faculty and students must be able to share their perspectives without concern that their views may be in tension with some “institutional” position on a particular issue. The Law School, therefore, will not tell its community which ideas to explore, which topics to discuss, which opinions to express, or which views to reject. Nor will the Law School take institutional positions on political or social issues.

What we will do is fiercely defend the values that are fundamental to our core mission, like free expression, open inquiry, and non-discrimination. Moreover, it is our responsibility to foster spaces in which views can be expressed freely, without impeding the rights of others to be heard. This means we have a policy framework that respects reasonable restrictions on the time, place, and manner of such actions.

Why? Because Columbia Law School 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.

The second principle is academic excellence.

At Columbia Law School, we prize deep intellectual rigor, fearless scholarly inquiry, and fully engaged learning. Academic excellence is not simply about getting good grades, it is about taking one's own intellectual development seriously.

How do we put this principle into practice?

We bring together an extraordinary community that is committed to the pursuit of knowledge—individuals of uncommon talent and skill, motivation and discipline, potential and purpose. We cultivate a rich and stimulating intellectual life. And we support the field-defining research of our exceptional faculty, which comprises some of the world's leading legal thinkers, scholars, and practitioners. We provide our students with a robust array of learning opportunities—across doctrinal, theoretical, and practical dimensions of the law.

You will find breadth and depth in our course offerings across disciplines. And because law does not operate in a vacuum, you will also have opportunities to study—and collaborate across—fields like economics, history, philosophy, public policy, and engineering by virtue of our connection to Columbia University. We also invest in innovative teaching in emerging and fast-changing areas where new legal frameworks are being built in real time—areas like artificial intelligence and data governance, cybersecurity, climate and energy, digital markets, and the evolving law of democracy.

We also make sure those offerings translate into robustly engaged learning: through seminars that sharpen your voice, workshops that develop your craft, clinics and externships that connect doctrine to clients and communities, and experiential courses that train you to exercise judgment under real constraints.

If we are doing things right, you will feel some measure of discomfort as you encounter ideas and perspectives that are different from your own. Know that this productive discomfort is by design.

I hope this gives you some sense of two principles that are critically important to our work here at Columbia Law School. But I want to take it one step further.

Principles like free expression and academic excellence do not uphold themselves. They only endure when people and institutions do the hard, daily work of living up to them. And the truth is: That work is rarely straightforward.

The hardest moments are not the ones where everyone agrees on the principle. The hardest moments are when principles come into contestation with one another, or when new practices test longstanding assumptions. So, the question for all of us is not whether principles matter. It is how to honor them when the reality is messy, the tradeoffs are stark, and practices are changing faster than the institutions designed to govern them.

This is happening in real time, right before our eyes. The world we live in is complex and this is an unsettled moment. New technologies raise thorny questions about privacy, accountability, and fairness. Economic pressures test whether access to justice is a promise or a privilege. Social and political division challenge the basic conditions of democratic self-government and the rule of law.

In the face of these challenges, you will be asked to do the hard work of upholding our core principles.

When you encounter perspectives that are different from your own—and you will—remember the principle of free expression. Do not rush to judgment. Do not foreclose further discussion or let disagreements get in the way of friendship. Instead, 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 interact across political, experiential, and cultural differences.

You are also entering law school at a moment when a tantalizing new option is literally at your fingertips: artificial intelligence. AI has already become a powerful tool in the legal profession. It can help you find cases, summarize arguments, generate outlines, and draft language. In practice, it is reshaping workflows and business models across the legal profession—and it is doing so quickly.

In just a few minutes, you will hear about some of the things the Law School is doing to prepare you to practice in the age of AI. Ultimately, however, forging a path through this period of upheaval and uncertainty will be up to all of you—the next generation of lawyers and scholars.

So, let me be clear. I am not asking you to pretend that these tools do not exist or to avoid using them altogether. When employed responsibly, they can help lawyers work more efficiently and broaden access to legal services.

But, importantly and very directly, I am asking you to take responsibility for your own education. To be honest with yourselves about the difference between using a tool to support your learning—and using a tool to substitute for it.

Do the reading. Come to class prepared not just to speak, but to listen. Write your own way through confusion. Ask for help early. Take your professors seriously, take your classmates seriously, and take your own development seriously.

Because if a machine is doing the thinking for you, you may still get to an answer. But you will not build the judgment that allows you to evaluate whether that answer is right, whether it is fair, whether it is complete, or whether it fits the problem in front of you. And good judgment is the currency on which outstanding lawyers trade.

Over the next three years, you will learn about the foundational values that underpin the rule of law, our democratic society, and the legal profession. You will learn how to read cases and statutes, construct arguments, interpret language, and examine evidence. But you will also face consequential choices. Situations in which you will be called upon to insist on guiding principles, and to build practices that are faithful to the values you claim to hold.

In some sense, this is what the law is all about. It is not just a collection of abstract aspirations, nor is it only a byzantine set of rules. The law is a vast and ongoing effort to translate principles into practices.

So, Class of 2029, as you begin this journey today: Learn the doctrines. Master the tools. Take advantage of everything this place offers.

But keep returning to first principles. Ask: What is the goal? What values are at stake? And what would it look like to honor those values in practice—here, now, in the world as it is?

Congratulations on beginning your Columbia Law School journey. We welcome you and we are honored to have you with us. Thank you.

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