

# LISTENING TABLES

## BY TRUST COLLABORATORY



Program Report

**ACADEMIC YEAR 2024-25**



The Trust  
Collaboratory  
INCITE | Columbia University



# The Trust Collaboratory

## Columbia University

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“A core part of the University’s identity is that we do not isolate ourselves from the outside world; this does not come without both effort and consequence. It requires an unusually strong allegiance to the principles of pluralism and mutual tolerance from all sides.”

– Gil Eyal (Columbia Spectator, September 8, 2024)



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# Overview



## About Us: The Trust Collaboratory

The Trust Collaboratory at Columbia University is one of the nation's first research centers studying the social dynamics of trust. Trust underpins our most intimate social relations and the functioning of our democracy. Trust shapes whether people believe in institutions, participate in public life, and are willing to engage with others across difference. As a research center, we leverage trans- and interdisciplinary formats to understand how building and repairing trust can support a thriving democracy in the 21st century.

With funding from the Mellon Foundation, The Trust Collaboratory launched in 2020 as the Mellon Sawyer Seminar on Trust and Mistrust of Science and Experts. A year later, the seminar transformed into The Trust Project with an expanded focus on public engagement with community partners in New York City. In the fall of 2022, with a generous startup grant from the Incite Institute at Columbia University,

The Trust Collaboratory took shape as a research center.

The Trust Collaboratory's research focuses on the three programmatic areas:

- Trust and mistrust of medicine and science, of medical experts, and scientists
- Trust in political and media institutions in the context of political polarization
- Trust in information technology, AI, and algorithms, as well as the impact of the spread of AI on institutional trust

Through these foci of research, we advance pioneering knowledge on what is needed to maintain and foster trust in a democratic society through education, participatory science, co-design, and community engagement. The Listening Tables are our youngest project, and they put into practice years of cumulative insights from our work on trust.



## Executive Summary: The Listening Tables Project

The divisions and political unrest sparked by the war in the Middle East deepened feelings of anger, fear, pain, and isolation at Columbia University. Responding to this crisis, we launched an unlikely experiment premised on a simple idea: What if we set up tables on campus where people could meet and hear each other, and where dialogue across differences of experience, identity, and opinion could be conducted? At the core of our venture was the hope that authentic listening could foster empathy and create a baseline of interpersonal trust. But the tricky thing with trust is that it takes time to build, and it always remains brittle. In our polarized community, the tables were meant to do the slow, intentional work of bridge-building. This work was not envisaged to be accomplished through grand gestures but through small, incremental steps that would begin to bring more and more people back together and help rebuild the frayed social fabric of trust on campus.

During the fall semester of 2024, the Listening Tables began to grow. They became a place for honest, sometimes difficult conversations, for moments of presence, togetherness and reflection at Columbia. The tables made space for those who felt voiceless and opened up the possibility for open and sometimes difficult conversations about many issues on our campus and beyond. Through dialogue, we began to build community. In our case, it looked like a few tables draped in purple cloth and a shared commitment to listening. It was a humble beginning, but it laid the foundation for real dialogue.



Unlike formal events like classroom discussions, academic trainings, debate clubs, or panels and lectures, the tables created a less formal setting. They were instead focused on practicing what become core to our project: from the moment participants joined, they did the work of dialogue and helped build, slowly and gradually, relational ties. By design, we did not prescribe topics and left it to participants to bring forward what felt most urgent to them, allowing what was meaningful to emerge naturally. This mode of listening, talking, and round-taking helped participants drop their guard. There was no pressure to debate, perform, or take a side. Sharing a meal at the tables gave space for connection, even among people who did not agree on all matters.





We asked participants to listen with respect—even when they disagreed deeply with what they heard—to resist the urge to respond immediately, and to avoid sweeping generalizations or turning the conversation into a lecture. We hoped that the experience of shared conversation could ease the sense of conflict, lower the emotional temperature, and help us together make sense of what we were living through, and how to move forward.

In 2024–2025, we hosted over 150 sessions across dining halls, libraries, and Columbia’s outdoor spaces. This brought around 1,800 participants to the Listening Tables. Our sessions ranged from large events with more than 100 participants to “pop-up tables” led by our student fellows that engaged smaller groups of participants in creative ways.

The tables quickly became a space where people from diverse disciplines and backgrounds could engage each other: From undergraduates and graduate students to alumni, professors, staff, University leaders and administrators, our sessions filled a niche for Columbia’s many constituencies to connect through listening and dialogue.

The Listening Tables showed us that talking across differences is productive and one of the foundational skills in cultivating community-minded citizens. Those who attended found that they were more alike than they thought; boundaries, real and imaginary, started to dissolve and the tables became a place not only of dialogue, but also of camaraderie and deep intellectual engagement. We forged a space where the vision of academic pluralism was reaffirmed, one table at a time.





“Coming back weekly and sitting among very different participants, it teaches you how to respect another person’s opinion, even if you don’t like what they are saying.”

**Yash Misra (SEAS '26)**



## Those Who Made it Happen: The Listening Tables Team



**The team:** The tables were the result of the ideas, energy, and heart students and faculty brought to this work.

Launched in late summer 2024 by Gil Eyal and Cristian Capotescu, the Listening Tables grew organically into a collaborative effort, sustained by a dedicated team of students and faculty across the Columbia campus. What fueled its growth was a shared belief in the need for a space for dialogue, listening, and contact. We came from different schools, countries, faiths, and life experiences, and held different roles within the university, but we all felt that this initiative was necessary for all of us. The commitment of many outstanding team members made the Listening Tables possible. Their ideas, energy, time, and heart over the first year provided the project with new directions, stability, and growth.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the members of this “core team” who played a critical role in the success of this project by helping manage the ever-increasing lists of tasks, from setting up the tables on campus to designing and printing flyers; by providing tech and newsletter support; by recruiting hosts, and occasionally by hosting the tables themselves. The team spent many evenings discussing and planning sessions, schedules, and logistics over Zoom or after listening sessions. The energy and enthusiasm of so many in this group made it often appear as though the Listening Tables were not an academic project, but a small start-up. With such an exceptional team, a year quickly flew by!





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**We also acknowledge the  
following students for  
contributing to this project:**

Neha Arora  
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Darines Nolasco Gutierrez

Krishna Kishore Pandalaneni  
Harvey Pennington  
Swathi Pottabathini  
Ekta Shaikh





“A lot of people tend to think disagreeing with someone is hating them or hating what they stand for, but it’s more like you’re not seeing eye to eye on something. So acknowledging that and then hearing someone out, I think those are very important skills that we don’t appreciate enough in life.”

-Angelina J Raymond (CC '28)



## Kudos: Our Supporters and Funders



This project could not have been successful without the institutional support of many university leaders, administrators, and faculty at Columbia. We are grateful to the many hands who have helped us throughout the first year of our program on every level. Through their financial contributions, constructive advice, and, perhaps most importantly, through their encouragement, we have been able to embark on this journey together. In the following, we wish to highlight our supporters and their contributions to the success of the Listening Tables:

**Amy Hungerford (Executive Vice President of Arts and Sciences):** We thank Amy for her words of encouragement, which were followed by material support at every turn, especially in urgent moments when it mattered most. Amy's support created the spark needed to turn what could have remained a mere brainchild into reality. The project's purple color is hers, too.

**Incite Institute:** We would like to thank Peter Bearman, Incite's Director, for offering practical guidance from the very beginning on how to implement a project of this scale. We also wish to thank Incite's staff, including Madeline Alexander and Renée Douglas, whose support was invaluable in helping us manage both the small and large administrative dimensions of this effort.

**Katrina Armstrong (Interim President of Columbia University):** Columbia's former Interim President deserves much recognition for telling us early on, and in no uncertain terms, that she and her office had our back. Katrina recognized the importance of the Listening Tables to Columbia and supported our program. She even came down from Low Library to host a session herself. We greatly appreciate her leadership and vision in a turbulent time for our campus.



**The Office of the President:** When Katrina was gone, David Greenberg, the EVP for University Facilities and Operations, stepped in and lent us his support. We needed tables, tablecloths, signs, food, space, and we needed it all for free. David said, “Anything you need.”

**Keith Goggin (Trustee of Columbia University):** He is a special member of Columbia’s Board of Trustees, whom we would like to thank. Keith wins, hands down, the title of “most tables hosted, most tables attended, most conversations conducted.” Rain or shine, outside or inside, Keith was there, handling the difficult conversations and the inspiring ones as well. We are grateful for Keith’s enthusiasm to man the tables and join us in the trenches. Our students appreciate seeing his leadership in action and his openness to enter into dialogue.

**The Office of the Provost and Dennis Mitchell (Senior Advisor for Inclusion and Belonging):** We thank the Office of the Provost and Dennis for their enduring support in the form of a Dialogue Across Difference Grant. Dennis also lent fortitude to our work by appearing several times and hosting sessions. We also owe special thanks to Columbia’s Provost, Angela Olinto, who has championed the Listening Tables from the beginning, both as a host and a patron.

**Sarah Cole (Dean of the School of the Arts) and Melanie Bernitz (Interim Vice President of University Life):** Sarah was with us from day 1, when the Listening Tables were just a small table on the Philosophy Hall lawn. She hosted our second-ever table and returned multiple times to host more. Whenever Sarah was needed, she was there—no questions asked. And we know that the students at her tables felt listened to. Thank you, Sarah. In the same breath, we would like to thank Melanie Bernitz. With Melanie at the helm in University Life, we always knew that there was someone who would listen

to us, and who would move mountains to make it possible to run the tables. Thank you, Melanie.

**Scott Wright (Vice President for Campus Services), Vicki Dunn (Assistant Vice President, Columbia Dining), and Christina Appollonio (Director of Operations at John Jay):** When winter came, the Listening Tables faced an existential challenge. How would we continue with shivering students, out there in the mid-30s and snow? We would like to thank Scott, Vicki, and Christina who saved the day. Finding a home at the John Jay Dining Hall made a smooth transition indoors not only possible but also a tremendous success. Scott, Vicki, and Christina were not only helpful but also efficient and thorough. They asked for details about our needs and event attendance, and like magic, produced the solutions we needed. The dining team means business!

**Ann Thornton (Vice Provost and University Librarian):** And when John Jay was not available, the Watson Library in Uris Hall housed our tables on occasion. We extend our thanks to Ann and her staff for their kind hospitality.

**Earl Hall and Ian Rottenberg (Dean for Religious Life):** Ian’s partnership was a proverbial blessing for our tables. He and his staff at Earl Hall—including Tessa McGowan and Karissa Thacker—have been steadfast in their support, helping us time and again with generosity and kindness by opening Earl Hall for our work and housing our fellowship program.

**Amy Werman (Lecturer in the School of Social Work):** When the tables were just babies, Amy contacted us to offer her support. We want to thank her for not only hosting multiple sessions, but also for conducting with her students an impact evaluation of the program. Thank you, Amy, also for co-teaching the photovoice workshop!



**Alumni:** The Columbia Alumni Association is an exceptional group. We thank its President, Donna MacPhee, as well as Adlar Garcia, the Associate Dean for Columbia College Alumni Relations & Engagement, for their partnership. We are especially grateful to them for introducing us to Columbia's alumni network, which helped us expand our reach far beyond the gates of Morningside Heights.

**Peter Dixon and Beth Fisher-Yoshida (Professors of Practice, NECR Program):** At the School of Professional Studies, we received strategic advice and support from Peter Dixon and Beth Fisher-Yoshida, professors of negotiation and conflict resolution. They also hosted several tables and offered encouragement. Thank you to both for their kindness and guidance!

**Michelle Arbid (Adjunct Lecturer, NECR Program):** Michelle found us through Peter and Beth, and from the moment she offered to volunteer to help with a marathon session of tables hosted on October 7, we hit it off. Michelle also contributed her exceptional insights as a professional conflict resolution trainer as an instructor in our Listening Tables Core Fellowship program.

**School for International and Public Affairs:** At SIPA, Jilliene Rodriguez, the Associate Dean for Diversity and Community Engagement, helped us advertise the tables and directed students to us, some of whom enthusiastically joined in and supported our project.

**John Stoops (The Revival, Chicago):** A special thank you goes to John who cold-called us with the idea of introducing improv skills to the Listening Tables. His workshop was a hit with our student fellows and we learned that improv theater is not about jokes but about "Yes, and..."

**Zion Ozeri (Independent Photographer):** Zion was like John, another wonderful external contributor to our Listening Tables Fellowship Program. He graciously and with enthusiasm provided his professional expertise to sharpen the eyes of our ambassadors for the art of photography.

**Columbia College:** The College is where we have incurred a serious list of debts. We are grateful to Roger Lehecka, the Dean of Undergraduate Student Life, and the team at Columbia College, who supported the tables from the day we set up the first session. We extend our appreciation to Roger, who was also kind enough to serve as a table host.

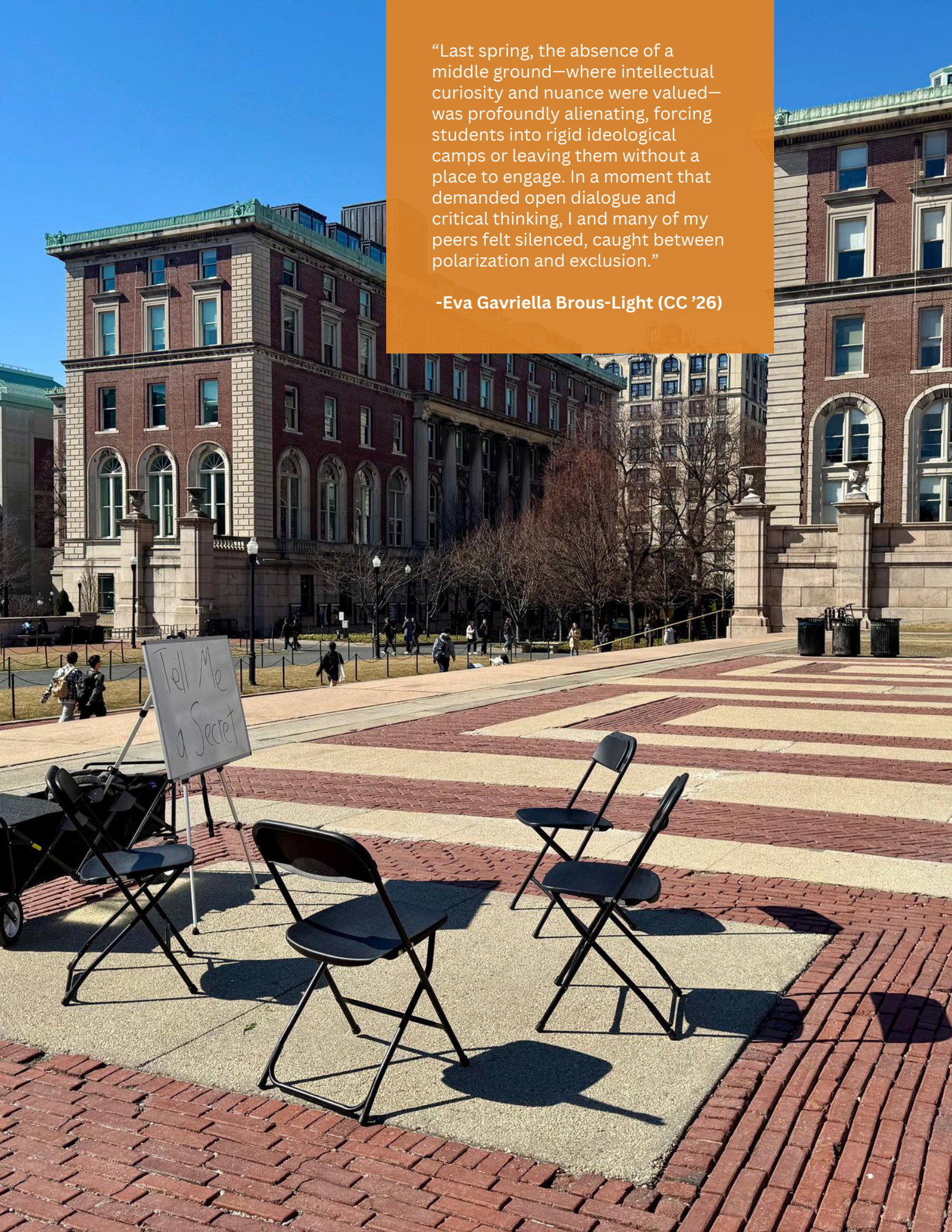
**Larry Jackson (Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum) and Ashley Nail (Assistant Dean of Academic Programming):** But most importantly, Larry Jackson and his team at Columbia College deserve our deep gratitude. Larry hosted so many tables. His energy and infectious enthusiasm kept us all going, and ultimately, he became our partner in crime. We designed, launched, and ran the Listening Tables Core Fellowship Program together. Thank you, Larry! We could not have done this without your passion and devotion to our student community. And thank you also Ashley Nail, Larry's indispensable colleague in the Core, for your presence and willingness to lend a hand whenever we needed you. Projects like the tables could not succeed without outstanding individuals like you.

**External Funders:** Finally, we would like to acknowledge the financial assistance we received from Interfaith America through a Strengthening the Campus Community Grant and a generous gift from Vivian Ostrovsky. We thank our donors for supporting our work.



“Last spring, the absence of a middle ground—where intellectual curiosity and nuance were valued—was profoundly alienating, forcing students into rigid ideological camps or leaving them without a place to engage. In a moment that demanded open dialogue and critical thinking, I and many of my peers felt silenced, caught between polarization and exclusion.”

-Eva Gavriella Brous-Light (CC '26)





# A Year in the Rear View



When we began organizing the Listening Tables on the Morningside campus in early fall of 2024, the most fitting way to describe the state of our campaign was an experiment held together by duct tape and cautious optimism. We built the plane as we flew it, hauling tables across campus, taping up signs, and trying to set up in various locations around the campus. Through trial and error, we learned where students were most likely to stop, sit, and stay. It took weeks (and many iterations) to understand where, when, and how to make the format work. By the spring semester, we had gradually built a community of enthusiastic participants, many of whom became “return customers.” This consistency mattered because it allowed people to recognize familiar faces,

revisit shared themes, and build on each other’s stories, sometimes carrying conversations beyond the tables into friendships and professional connections. These dynamics affirmed what we had sensed all along: the tables were meeting a real need for dialogue across difference, for community, and for a new kind of listening format.

In the following, we provide an overview of our program activities and offer some insights into the scope of our work. But numbers never tell the full story. We also distill some lessons learned and present key takeaways from participants about their experiences at the Listening Tables, what they took away, and what the format meant to them.



"I love [attending the] Listening Tables because I meet people I've never, never met before and never would have met. They share way more and that's way more insightful than I hear things in class."

-Student Participant

## Taking Stock: Listening Tables by the Numbers

### Highlights from the Academic Year 2024-25



**153 Sessions**  
since launching in  
September 2024



**1800 Participants**  
attended

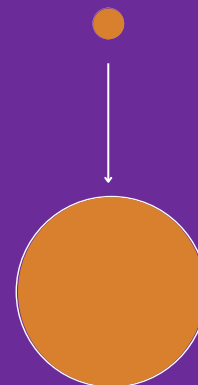


**89 Hosts**  
from across campus  
facilitated

Since launching Listening Tables in September 2024, we have hosted 153 sessions with around 1,800 participants from across the Columbia campus. A total of 89 hosts helped facilitate these conversations, offering guidance, care, and consistency to our community.

We began with a small group in early fall. One participant described one of our early sessions as "just a few people sitting around a table, kind of unsure what to expect." Over time, the space grew into something many students came to rely on. By late fall, weekly attendance reached 90 to 100 people. A student shared, "I've had more real conversations here than anywhere else this year."

We started with a dozen of table participants in early September 2024



Our sessions grew to an average of 90-100 weekly attendees in late Fall 2024



**Campus locations** where we organized table sessions (size of circle denotes frequency)



### Quick Facts



On average, sessions lasted between **60-90 minutes**

On average, **10 people** attend a session.

### Conversation Topics

We kept the agenda of the tables open to follow what was on people's mind. As Columbia became entangled in global events, we spoke about the war in Gaza, protests, the university's response, academic freedom, free speech, the election, media coverage, student debt, career pressure, international student concerns, and more.

### AND THE AWARDS GO TO...



...the outstanding individuals who have attended and hosted tables:

### TOP 3 ATTENDEES



Chanakya Dowluru (11x)  
Shanice Gomes (11x)  
Eileen Feng (10x)

### TOP 3 HOSTS



Keith Goggin (Trustee)  
Abi E. Wright (Journalism)  
Ryan Hagen (Sociology)

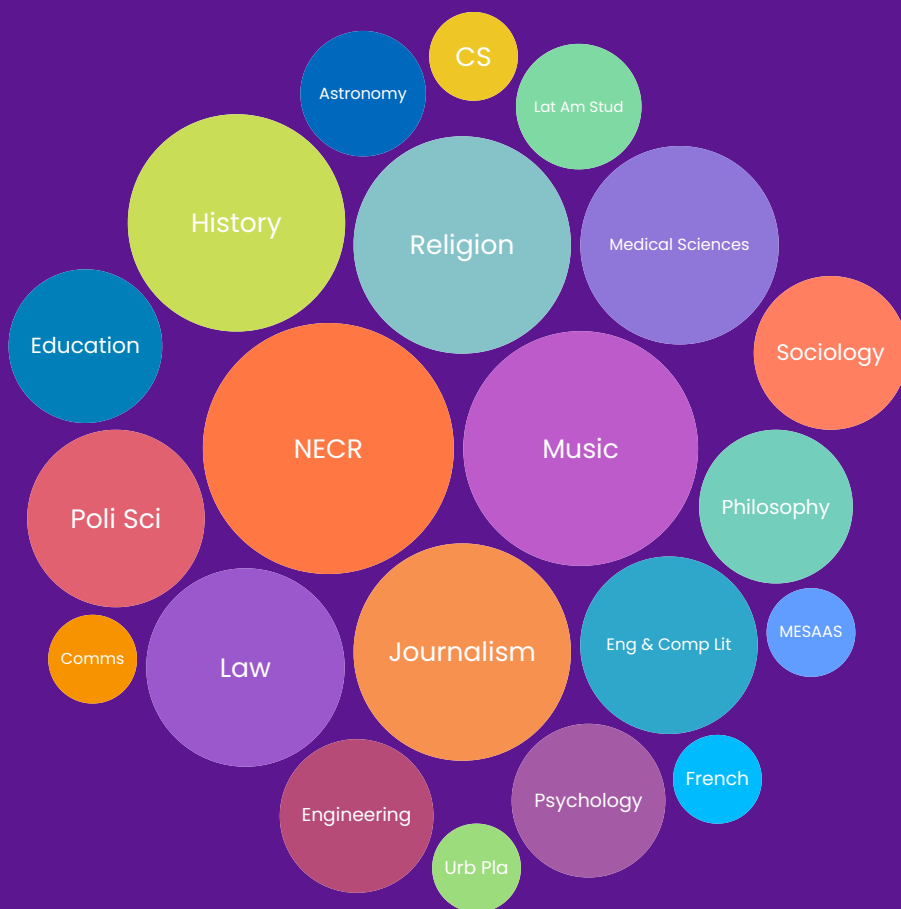


## What We Learned: Snapshots from the Tables

At the start of the spring semester, we conducted a survey to better understand the impact of Listening Tables. While not designed to be statistically representative, the results offer a snapshot of who participated, which academic disciplines the hosts came from, and what schools the students represented.

We also conducted a series of informal feedback interviews with participants (hosts and attendees) to learn what drew them to the tables, what encouraged them to stay, and how the experience shaped their sense of belonging to Columbia's community. We blend insights from these different data sources below.

### Disciplines represented among table hosts based on number of sessions hosted (snapshot December 2024)

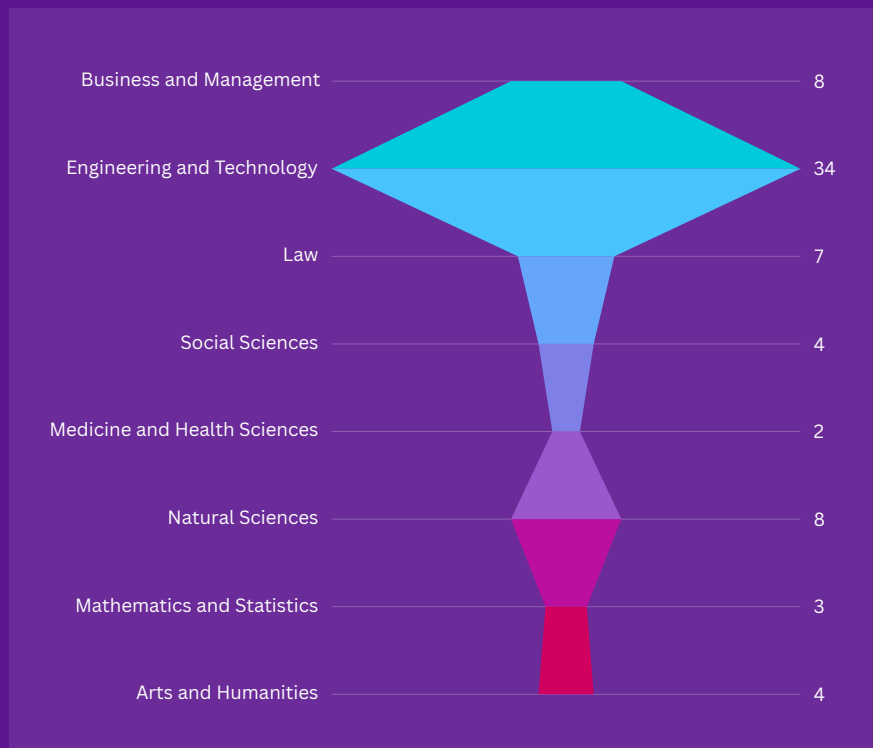


### Assembling the Campus

With nearly 90 hosts, our tables reflected Columbia's academic breadth. Sessions were facilitated by numerous members of our campus community, including faculty, alumni, university leaders, administrators, and students. This format helped create a distinct space for dialogue between the University's core constituencies. Some students said that the tables allowed them to share insights they would not normally bring up in class. Others said that the tables did not feel like school, therapy, activism, or office hours. They were instead a space where people could meet and engage in deep and unfiltered discussions.



## Distribution by academic discipline of participants attending the tables (snapshot December 2024)



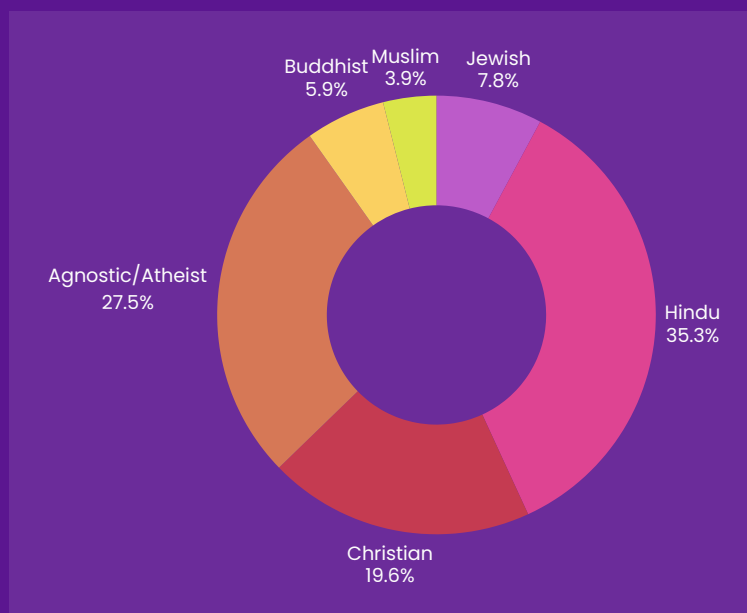
### An Interdisciplinary Space for Dialogue

On a campus typically structured by schools and disciplines, the tables provided students with an opportunity to forge relationships across silos. Our December snapshot registered a high number of graduate students in STEM fields. While the tables' distribution often changed, we heard repeatedly from students in engineering or computer science programs that spaces centered on dialogue were sorely needed.

### A Social Space for Everyone

The tables attracted a diverse cast of participants. Many students, especially those in Master's programs, STEM fields, and international students, as well as freshmen, spoke about how isolating campus life can be because of its fast pace. The tables offered a space for everyone and across differences to take a break together. For some, it was the only time in their week that they sat and shared a meal with others. In that unstructured hour, students found connection without needing credentials, invitations, or prior ties.

## Distribution by religion of participants attending the tables (snapshot December 2024)





## The Impact We Created: Seven Theses for Change



### Supporting the University's Core Mission: A Place for Deep Thinking

Students often spoke about the fear of being excluded or judged if their opinions did not align with dominant campus narratives. That kind of fear to engage, one host observed, undermines the core mission of a university: to test assumptions, encounter unfamiliar perspectives, and refine one's understanding. The Listening Tables offered an alternative structure for intellectual engagement, where participants could speak honestly, trusting that others came in with a good-faith desire to seek common ground, challenge ideas, and, at times, reconsider their own views. "It helped me process what I actually thought," one participant said, "without feeling judged for not knowing." Our goal was to help students move beyond the fear of saying the wrong thing, and instead practice communication rooted in curiosity and the willingness to think and articulate ideas together. Some participants said they appreciated being able to "just listen" at first and join when they were ready. For many, it was the only space on campus where they felt they could speak honestly, with nuance, and without the fear of social repercussions. The tables created a place that represented the best of academic life: deep and thoughtful conversations about important issues that matter to people.



### Back to Basics: Restoring Civility through Physical Space

In a world where online discourse often spirals into hostility and algorithms reward outrage, the Listening Tables invited participants to join face-to-face

conversations grounded in respect and a shared desire to hear one another. The simple act of sitting across from someone over a meal invited empathy and softened division. As one participant put it, "It is difficult to hate someone you sat next to and had a meal with." Even when strong disagreements arose, the conversations did not devolve into shouting matches. Sharing a physical space and breaking bread together offered what no app, no algorithm, and no technology gimmick can do: seeing the whole person, not just a comment on the screen. This created and strengthened relational ties and helped cultivate skills that have been partially lost or atrophied in the digital age.



### A "Middle Space" that Builds Bridges

At a time when the temperature on campus was running high, the Listening Tables offered a different tone. Sessions were described as "respectful," "non-reactive," and at the same time, "fruitful" and "insightful." As one student put it, "Disagreement didn't automatically mean disrespect." Many came to see the tables as a "middle space" for dialogue across difference, a rare set up where people with vastly different views did not engage in heated debate but instead tried to understand each other even when it was hard to do. As one faculty member observed, much of campus discourse is dominated by a small group of politically vocal students, while a "larger, silent majority" often finds itself caught in the middle, unsure of how to engage without risking misunderstanding or hostile conflict. The tables offered that majority a place to



interact on their own terms. A participant talked about watching someone share regret about voting Republican and being met not with judgment, but with curiosity. The format made room for honesty and the ability to sit with difference without the immediate need to persuade others of one's opinion or jettison one's views for the sake of reaching a consensus or resolution. As one of the participants put it, "I don't think there are other initiatives that are similar. I think the Listening Tables were offering something that was pretty unique for students." We heard time and again that students felt the tables were a much-needed space in the middle that had disappeared on campus since the outbreak of the war in the Middle East.



#### **A Communication Channel between Students, Faculty, and University Leaders**

The Listening Tables created the kind of conversations across roles and hierarchies that rarely happen in a university setting. "At my table, there was a trustee, a professor, and me. And I was like, 'This is crazy.' I don't know if I would have ever spoken to either of them otherwise," said one undergraduate. "I don't think I've ever had a conversation with someone in admin before that wasn't about paperwork." Another student noted, "These conversations help you build a shared ground. And also, when you meet people with institutional weight, it feels worthwhile. You're getting free food and these meaningful interactions. What else can you ask for?" Faculty and administrators echoed this sense of how uncommon and humanizing these interactions were. In recent months, many said they had felt unsure about what students were truly thinking or feeling amid the University's turbulence. After attending the Listening Tables, many hosts and faculty participants expressed deep gratitude for the chance to engage in open, grounded conversations.

These informal moments offered a chance for students and individuals in leadership positions at Columbia to speak as members of the same community. For students, this was an opportunity to voice concerns, share experiences, and ask questions to better understand decisions made at the leadership level during a time when many felt alienated from the process of institutional decision-making. For university leaders, it offered a chance to understand what students were experiencing. These moments shifted the tone from defensiveness to dialogue. At a time when the university has been under attack, and outside forces seek to exploit internal divisions, the tables helped remind members of all levels and persuasions on our campus that we have a fundamental stake in what we share as constituents of Columbia's academic community.



#### **The Conversations Did Not Stop at the Tables, They Continued Beyond**

Several participants noted the lasting impact of their interactions at the tables. One student remarked that "it stayed with me" about something another attendee had shared. Reflecting on her experience, one student noted that hearing from someone outside her usual social or political circle shifted her own perspective. "It gave me a different view," she said. "It made me feel empathy I never expected to feel. The world isn't black and white... That's what the Listening Table gave me." Students came back not because they had unresolved questions, but because they were still processing what they had heard—and wanted more of it. Several participants reflected that it was rare to have unfiltered, honest, and vulnerable conversations with strangers. Another described the moment as "just so raw," adding, "I was like, 'Oh wow, people are actually, like, opening up here.' And I left thinking about it for days."





### A Place to Overcome Loneliness

Some participants came to the tables to find company—especially Master’s and international students—for whom campus felt busy but disconnected. “You sit in a lecture and then you leave,” one student said. “That’s it. You don’t talk to anyone.” At the Listening Tables, there was no pressure to speak or perform. Anyone curious could join. “At first I came for the food,” one student said. “But after a couple times, I realized people were really talking. I started meeting people I never would’ve crossed paths with. And sometimes we’d hang out for hours afterward.” Over time, this simple ritual created a rhythm of belonging. “It doesn’t need big words like ‘dialogue,’” one participant noted. “We’re just eating and chatting. There’s something so mundane and sacred about it, like, a cultural moment, where you’re not eating in front of a computer.” The tables became a reliable check-in point, where one-time conversations turned into friendships. “My friend met someone at a Listening Table, and then a group of them went out. They went to bars, the parks, just hung out.” Quiet but lasting, low-key yet transformative, these moments nourished trust as students learned to relate to one another differently.



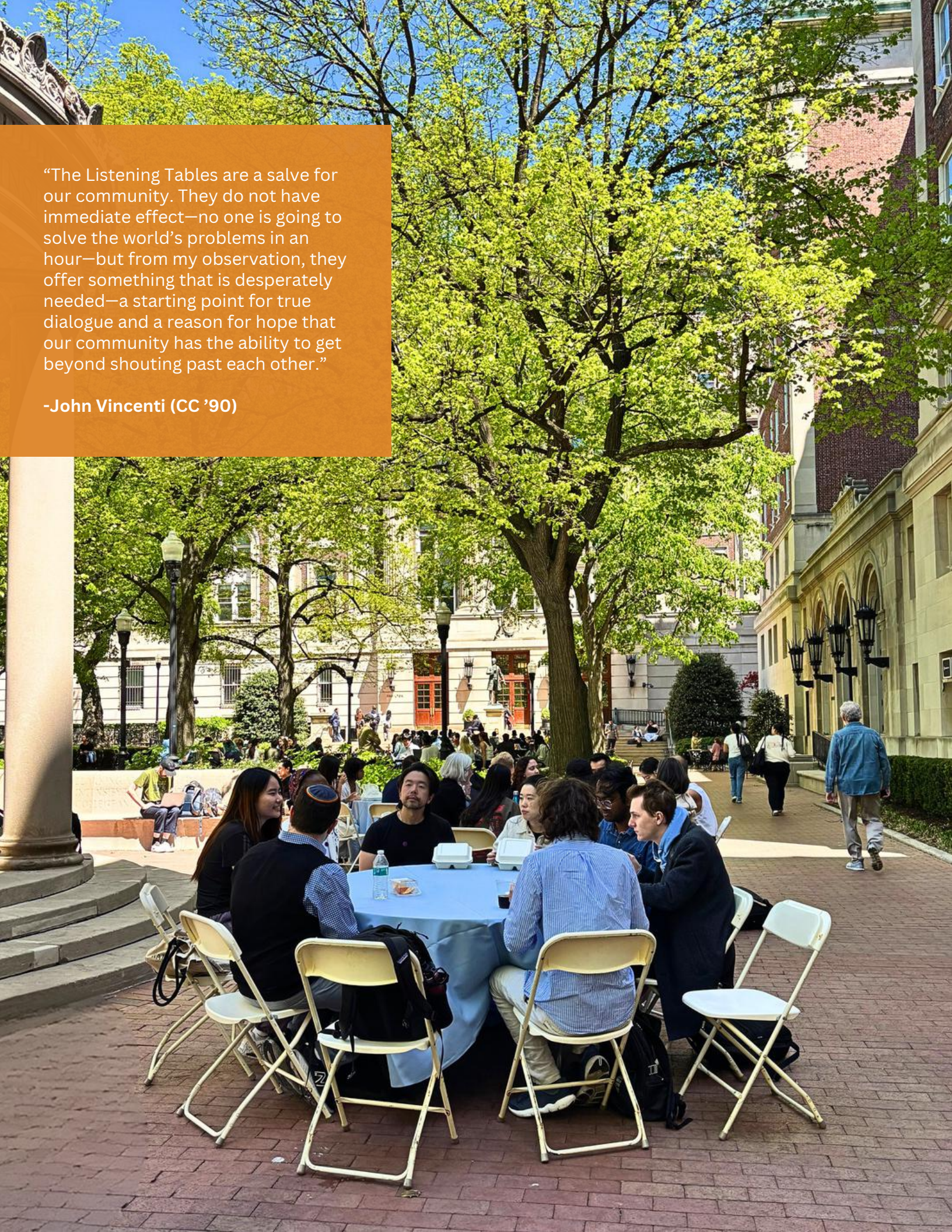
### Co-Creating Campus Culture, Rebuilding Trust

In a high-pressure, high-performance environment like Columbia, the tables created a softer rhythm. They opened up the possibility of rebalancing campus culture toward a more connected community, where students were given the chance to socialize organically and authentically. A participant noted, “You’re like, ‘Okay, I don’t have time to talk with you right now, but I’ll see you at Listening Tables.’” The tables provided a space for students to return to and connect with like-minded individuals in ways that were not strictly about completing assignments, planning summer internships, and other productivity-related activities. We learned that engagement of this kind cannot be introduced from the top down. Students asked for ownership. They wanted to lead their own tables and co-produce campus life. We met this need by offering students a frame, and they filled it with substance: by choosing what to discuss at the tables, by hosting and experimenting with different session formats, and by managing many of the key aspects of this project with us. For an institution seeking to rebuild trust, this shared groundwork is essential.



“The Listening Tables are a salve for our community. They do not have immediate effect—no one is going to solve the world’s problems in an hour—but from my observation, they offer something that is desperately needed—a starting point for true dialogue and a reason for hope that our community has the ability to get beyond shouting past each other.”

-John Vincenti (CC '90)





# Listening Tables Core Fellowship Program



**The first fellowship cohort assembles:** Our inaugural session in Earl Hall in March 2025.

## **Our Pilot:** Teaching Dialogue and Listening

Based on the overwhelming feedback from students who had participated in the Listening Tables throughout the fall, we heard one message loud and clear: students wanted to be given more voice and visibility as organizers and facilitators of these conversations. To meet this demand, we began developing ideas for a pilot program. But how to organize this at scale? From the outset, it was clear to us that we could not do this alone, and as luck would have it, the ideal partner for this venture was by our side:

Larry Jackson, the Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum, had supported the tables enthusiastically as a host of several sessions throughout the fall. With him and his team, we began working on a new curriculum that would train undergraduate students from Columbia College in the art of dialogue. In early winter 2025, the Listening Tables Core Fellowship program was born. Ian Rottenberg offered his space at Earl Hall to host the program, and a match was made in heaven.



The principal site for this program was a series of workshops organized for our inaugural cohort of 23 students. Over the course of two months, we offered sessions for the full group, along with separate activities tailored to each subgroup. One subgroup, our Fellows, developed new formats for listening on campus. The other, our Ambassadors, used a participatory action research method called “photovoice” to surface and document both visible and less visible moments, spaces, and relationships where dialogue on campus thrived—or was notably absent.

For both groups the goal was to learn and practice the act of listening and dialogue as well as thinking deeply about trust, reconciliation, and the role of the modern university. The culminating task for our Fellows was to host their own sessions in ways that expanded our format to new places and groups in our community. We are pleased to present a small sample of reports that highlight where our Fellows hosted their sessions and what they learned about the value of listening and dialogue at Columbia.

### The Scoop: Insights from our Fellows



**By Elizabeth Frost (CC '28)**

Before the spring semester of sophomore year, I had become involved in many corners of campus—from sports to cultural groups to an academic journal. As I began reflecting on the kind of impact I wanted to leave behind, I realized it had to start with the way I interacted with others. I wanted to become a better listener—someone more open-minded and genuinely curious about people from all backgrounds. When my Contemporary Civilizations professor recommended the Listening Tables, I immediately resonated with The Trust Collaboratory’s mission and saw it as the perfect opportunity to develop these skills while connecting with more people across campus.

I’m incredibly grateful to have joined the inaugural Listening Tables cohort. Meeting others who were committed to bridging divides helped me grow into a more thoughtful and intentional communicator.

Through our Friday seminars and even a special improv session, I learned techniques like reading body language, using “yes, and” responses, and checking my unconscious reactions in real time. I started bringing these skills into everyday conversations, and over time, I noticed a real shift in how I listen, respond, and stay open to new perspectives. These practices have helped me expand my understanding of the Columbia community and build deeper connections.

My first listening table in John Jay dining hall felt more like a discussion circle where everyone was expected to weigh in. Even with a facilitator, there was a certain pressure to offer an opinion or personal story. But when I got to host my own table, everything changed. I realized how powerful it could be to center a conversation on something totally unrelated to campus life or politics. Getting to know people for who they are before learning what they think allowed me to slow down and really listen. Now, when I meet someone new, I lead with shared experiences or hobbies—it’s a more grounded way to connect and helps me stay open to people who may see the world differently.

For my table, I borrowed two chairs and a dry erase board from my mentor, Fin, and set up right outside of the Broadway gates on 116th. I chose the prompt: “Tell me a secret.” The first person to approach was a young girl, maybe seven or eight years old. Like many others after her, she asked, “What is this?” I explained she could tell me anything. Her secret? She didn’t think pineapple belongs on pizza. It was a light, funny moment, but it taught me that I wasn’t there to judge or fix—just to listen. Later, students my own age shared deeper secrets—about relationships, academic stress, or identity. None of them jumped right in. They eased into the conversation, introduced themselves, and tested the waters before opening up. That process of trust-building felt exactly like what the Listening Tables are meant to cultivate.

I’ve learned that people open up when they feel safe. If we approached difficult campus conversations with the same patience, empathy, and curiosity, we might all feel a little more heard. That’s the kind of culture I want to help build—and I’m grateful to have started that journey here.



**By Grace Hamilton (CC '27)**

My name is Grace Hamilton, and I am a rising third-year student at Columbia College studying history. I joined the Listening Table Fellowship program because it embodies everything I love about the Core—candid, sometimes vulnerable dialogue with people from all walks of life. A week before finals, I hosted my Listening Table in the Schapiro Sky

lounge. I texted a few friends, told them to bring a friend or two, and somehow, we ended up with ten people. We began with a quick round of intros to anchor our discussion. Then, I passed out slips of paper and asked everyone to write down one thing that was top-of-mind but difficult to discuss openly. And what came up—unsurprisingly but still potently—was the unfinished business of last spring, namely the protests and the encampment. We talked about the jarring way campus emptied out, how finals ended abruptly, and how so many of us never really got the chance to process what happened. The tension of that time still remains, and in many ways, it influenced our discussion of Columbia now: how different it feels from the school we first arrived at, and what kind of space we wish it could become. What surprised me most was how we quickly moved from frustration to forward-looking reflection—people began thinking aloud about how to rebuild trust. In this way, it felt very collaborative. The contributions also felt very balanced.

Even those who were quiet at first found their way in. One unexpected takeaway for me was realizing how generative silence can be. At the beginning, I felt that nervous urge to fill every gap, but holding back gave people space to speak when they were ready. Another interesting challenge was moderating subtle power dynamics. A few participants jumped in quickly and took up more air than others, which I didn’t anticipate. I found myself nudging things along, asking quieter voices what they thought, not to force anything, but to make it clear that the table was theirs too. There was a clear moment, about halfway through, when I felt the group click into place—not as friends, necessarily, but as people in a shared space who suddenly trusted each other.

That trust, I’ve learned, is easier to build than people think. Most of us are walking



around with things to say and nowhere to tell them. The culture of dialogue on campus feels fragmented, almost a little brittle. Many of the people at my table said this was the first time they'd had an open conversation like that since being at Columbia. It reinforced what we've talked about in class—that undergrads, in particular, are craving space to speak, even if they don't yet have an outlet for it. Hosting my own table only deepened my belief that this is the exact population that ought to be reached.

Ultimately, the Listening Tables work because they embody something essential. I came to Columbia because of the Core. I liked the idea of reading old books, yes, but more than that, I loved the idea of real conversation with people from all over. Of people sitting around a table and saying what they actually think, even when it's difficult. This program channels that spirit. It's grounded in curiosity, humility, and the belief that conversation, when done right, can create community and trust. I'm so grateful to have been a part of it.



**By Kylie Jade Thibodeau (CC '28)**

I'm Kylie Jade Thibodeau, an economics-political science student at Columbia University. I joined the Listening Tables Fellowship to help foster productive dialogue. Columbia is home to diverse viewpoints, which I believe can intersect to create understanding and both individual and collective growth. As a culmination of the fellowship, each participant led a Listening Table. To help us develop a plan, we each submitted proposals outlining our tables' locations, goals, structures, and rationales. Angelina, another fellow, and I had compatible proposals, so we partnered.



Our Listening Table was on May 2, 2025. Our goal was for people to leave with a new understanding of each other and our community, as well as feeling heard and understood. We chose to host the table on the Law Bridge because it offers diverse foot traffic from grad students, undergrads, and faculty. We had music, cookies, a sign, a picnic blanket, and chairs. The music and blanket helped counter perceptions that Listening Tables are overly formal or political. The circle of chairs worked to engage everyone in the conversation. Cookies and the sign attracted passersby. These aspects, which included deviations from the standard set-up of the Listening Tables, served us well as participants seemed relaxed while engaged. However, we also deviated from our plan. Initially, we had enough people for a small group conversation, but we wanted to maximize the perspectives present. So, we changed the sign. TJ, our Listening Tables mentor, walked around with the sign to recruit people, and its message was changed from "How are you really?" to something like "Free cookies!"



This increased participation and changed the nature of the conversation to include more perspectives. Participants were primarily undergrads, but the mix was extreme (either freshmen or seniors). Their conversations reflected different campus experiences—some had lived through protests last year, others hadn't; some knew the open campus, others didn't, for instance. The conversations were very casual—I think the informal environment was the reason. Topics included finals, first-versus final-year experiences, the best dorms (East Campus, apparently), and more.

However, we also discussed more serious topics. Some students expressed disinterest in the cause of the protests on campus, discontent with our media image, distrust in our administration, and uncertainty about the future due to federal threats to cut funding. Some felt unsafe with police on campus, while others didn't feel affected. Some students didn't mind the closed gates, while others cared deeply about having them opened again. Despite

these differences, they were curious about others' thoughts and respectfully engaged with each other.

As a table host, I realized that despite our very different perspectives and experiences with Columbia, there's always something we can learn from one another. And the way people were talking to each other at our table reflected this common understanding. I've learned through leading this table that Columbia students embrace spaces for dialogue, especially informal, relaxed, and open ones. These conversations are fruitful and improve understanding and camaraderie, and help inform us of what we feel, think, and what we can do.

"Institutionally (this is maybe a more esoteric point) but I really do believe it: institutions are incapable of care. They just can't. They're metaphorical, faceless, distributed, disjointed entities. And yet we often expect them to offer us love or care. I think that's a particularly American impulse to want care from an institution. But real care happens in specific communities, between real people. That's why I feel it's so important for individuals to step up. And that's what I appreciated about your initiative. It didn't offer that bureaucratic, symbolic hug. Instead, it created opportunities for people to reach out, talk to each other, and support each other directly. That's what matters."

**-Faculty Member**





“A real sense of trust has been broken. It would be cool to have actual dialogue between everyday students and the University administration. That would feel really powerful and important in my opinion.”

**-Student Participant**



# Listening Tables Photovoice Exhibit



## Listening, Dialogue, and Art: The Photovoice Method

The Photovoice Exhibit was part of the Listening Tables Core Fellowship Program, and it offered students who were designated as Ambassadors an opportunity to reflect on their experience with listening and dialogue on campus through photovoice. Photovoice is a participatory action research method that surfaces moments of resilience and strength in a community and highlights existing needs. It gives communities a tool to reassert their voice, authentically and confidently. We believe no better method can make visible the spaces at Columbia where remarkable acts of dialogue, community, and deep listening flourish, often unrecognized or taken for granted.

Through the combined lens of photography and storytelling that is conjoined via photovoice, our Ambassadors explored episodes where Columbia's community constitutes and self-constitutes through acts of listening, dialogue, and encounter. Our Ambassadors, the artists of what would become our own traveling exhibit, captured these fleeting moments in the many seen and unseen places, situations, and relationship on the Columbia campus that enable real connection and highlight many of our university's most remarkable traits: curiosity, intellectual rigor, respect, passion, and empathy for others.

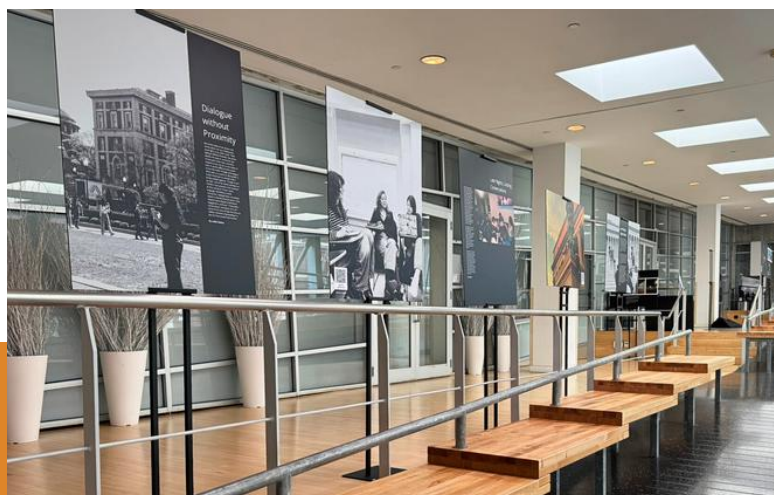




**Engaging Columbia:** The Photovoice Exhibit will travel to changing locations on campus (depicted here: exhibit staged in Pulitzer Hall).

The small sample of photovoices we bring to you gives a taste of what our students have brought to the surface about the many ways dialogue and listening can happen at Columbia—even in situations when agreement feels out of reach or when the odds seem low.

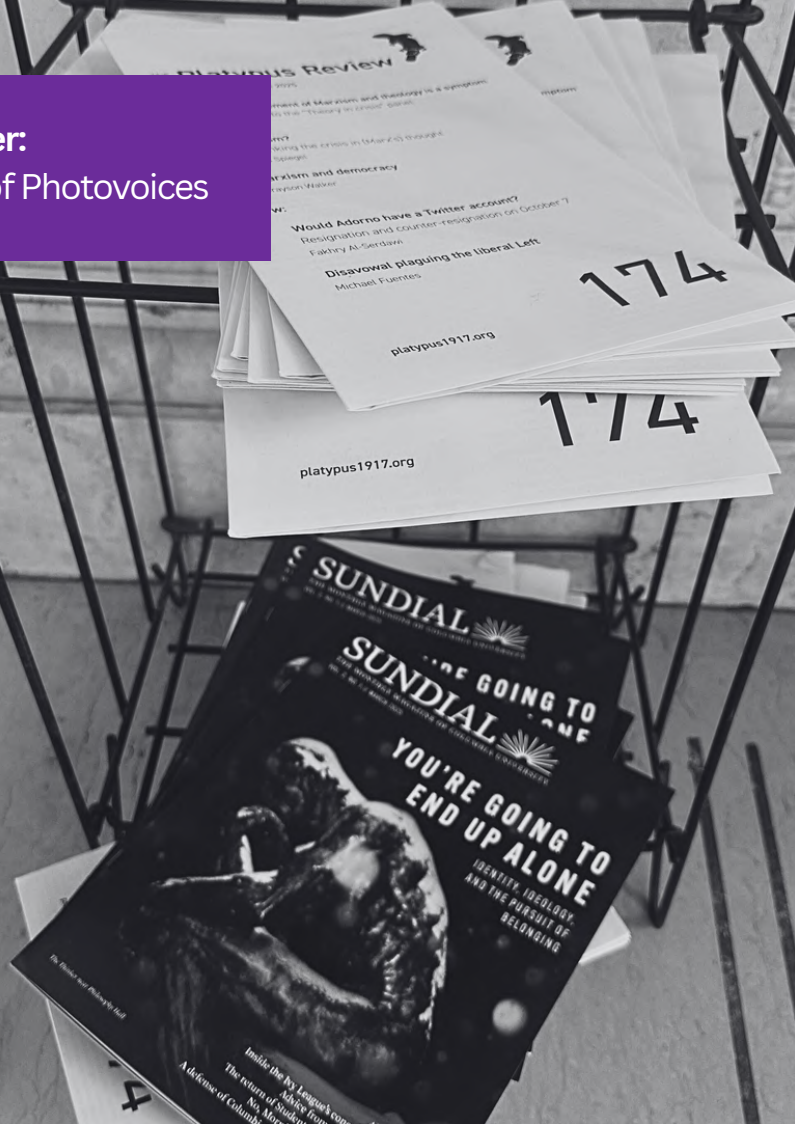
The complete collection of the Listening Tables Photovoice Exhibit is currently traveling the Columbia campus. It appeared this summer in Earl Hall, Pulitzer Hall, and Faculty House, and is now slated to be on display in Lerner Hall (5th Floor) until mid-fall 2025. Stop by to see these amazing stories in person!



**Lerner Hall:** The exhibit's temporary location is open to all members of the Columbia community until mid-fall 2025.



## A Teaser: Our Small Gallery of Photovoices



### Public Sphere of Print Ideas

A student pauses before the news rack outside Philosophy Hall, caught between the rush of classes. On the rack sit *The Platypus Review* and the *Columbia Sundial*, stacked side by side. At first glance, the two publications could not seem further apart: one grounded in Marxist theory, the other presenting itself as a nonpartisan defender of free speech. It is easy to assume they would have little to say to each other. And yet, when the student opens their pages, a surprising thread appears. Both express a deep dissatisfaction with the contemporary left. *Platypus* calls for a reconstruction of what progressive politics should stand for.

The *Sundial*, in its recent cover edition, critiques identity-first progressivism. Despite their surface differences, both

publications wrestle with the same sense of disillusionment. In that small moment, the news rack becomes more than a display stand. It becomes a site of silent dialogue, where ideas—across missions, ideologies, and affiliations—cross boundaries without a word. A student flipping through these pages does not encounter two separate conversations, but a shared intellectual search. Without uttering a word, they enter a deeper, more intellectually rich Columbia—one where the hard questions are tackled head-on.



By Imaan Chaudhry (CC '26)





## Golden Conversation

Bathed in the golden sunset, three friends decompress on a ledge in front of Columbia's Low Library. The big, austere building in the background sets a dramatic, academic tone with its Greek columns and etched writing. A huge copper light pole stands behind them, a testament to time and the millions of past students who must've had similar academic engagements on this same ledge. One of the girls is pointing out something in the distance, kicking off a moment of exploration and conversation.

It's not just small talk—they're caught up in the kind of deep, inquisitive chats that occur all over campus. This moment feels like a snapshot of student life: relaxed, contemplative, and full of good-hearted conversation.



**By Shannon Alexis Smith (CC '27)**





## Performative Peers & Poetic Parley

This is a scene from a recent campus production of “Caesar,” a student-run play that has been happening in public spaces, centered around Van Am Quad. The students transformed the spaces they performed in, dressing up the statue in a purple toga and using their own mood lighting. Multiple scenes and conversations in the show are happening simultaneously. The students adjacent to the scene are doing many things; some are walking to their next event, some are chatting in the “audience,” and one person is working on their computer.

I have been observing Caesar’s productions for over a month now as they have been practicing for their end-of-year showings. They have never had a faculty member there; it is completely and unequivocally student-run. In a time where there are so many different views in the media of what Columbia students are like, and so much up in the air around what Columbia will be in the future, these images portray a simple truth: that regardless of campus polarization and government defunding, Columbia students are as creative, tenacious, and gutsy as ever. They take risks, they make art, and they feel at home on their own campus. While the actor may be “dead” in this scene, our campus and students are very much alive.



By Stanley William Davis (CC '26)





### Photo Credits

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