Davis Polk Leadership Initiative 2026 Report

Columbia Law School
DAVIS POLK LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

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OUR MISSION

The Davis Polk Leadership Initiative is an innovative and path-breaking leadership program that supports law students in cultivating and practicing leadership skills for succeeding and thriving at every stage of their professional development in a wide variety of professional, civic, and personal settings.

Successful lawyers can influence, negotiate, facilitate, and strategize. They have the capacity to engage in difficult conversations and complex challenges, often in collaboration with others. Students participating in the Leadership Initiative at Columbia Law School learn those critical skills and graduate with a confidence in their leadership competencies.

This groundbreaking initiative is supported by a generous grant from Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP. With the support of the firm, the Law School has developed an integrated series of courses, workshops, fellowships, grants, and mentorship opportunities that allow for in-depth learning in innovative ways.

OUR TEAM



Petal Modeste, Co-Chair

Associate Dean
Professional Affairs
Administration



Susan Sturm, Co-Chair

George M. Jaffin
Professor of Law and
Social Responsibility



Lynnise Pantin '03, Co-Chair

Pritzker Pucker Family Clinical
Professor of Transactional Law
Vice Dean for Experiential Education



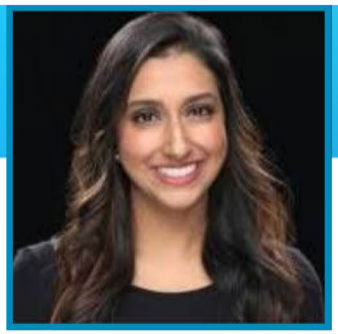
Eunice Hong '16, Director

Lecturer-in-Law,
Lawyer Leadership
Seminar

ADVISORY COMMITTEE



Kate Andrias*
Patricia D. and R. Paul Yetter
Professor of Law



Roshni Banker Cariello '11
Partner
Davis Polk



Dennis Fan '15
Director and Clinical Professor
Appellate Litigation Clinic



Clare Huntington '96*
Barbara Aronstein Black
Professor of Law



Vanessa Jackson '12
Partner
Davis Polk



Jessica Valdez Jimenez '04
Director of Externships and
Placement-Based Learning

*2025–2026

ADVISORY COMMITTEE



Lynnise Pantin '03
Pritzker Pucker Family Clinical
Professor of Transactional Law
Vice Dean for Experiential Education



Petal Modeste
Associate Dean
Professional Affairs Administration



Danielle Schweiloch
Assistant Dean
Office of Private Sector Careers



Erica Smock*
Assistant Dean
Office of Public Interest/Public Service
Law and Careers

*2025-2026

ADVISORY COMMITTEE



Susan P. Sturm
George M. Jaffin
Professor of Law and
Social Responsibility



Reilly S. Steel '17
Associate Professor



Eric Talley
Marc and Eva Stern
Professor of Law and Business



Marissa L. Zalk
Associate Director
Office of Judicial Careers

LEADERSHIP COACHES



Richard Gray
Lecturer-in-Law
Director of Community and School Development, Center for Collaborative Education



Eunice Hong '16
Director, DPLI
Lecturer-in-Law



Gary Ireland*
Law Offices of Gary Ireland
Legal Strategist



Warren Motley '89
Retired Partner, Davis Polk
Counselor for Office of Private Sector Careers

*Spring 2026



Joanne De Silva
Retired Partner
Mayer Brown



Warren Motley '89
Retired Partner, Davis Polk
Counselor for Office of Private Sector Careers

EXPERIENCED PRACTITIONERS IN RESIDENCE



Michael H. Ullmann '83
Retired General Counsel
Johnson & Johnson



Michele Warman
Retired General Counsel
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

FELLOWSHIPS

The **Davis Polk Leadership Fellowship** is a year-long program that provides recipients with resources and support from faculty, staff, and leadership coaches to build their leadership capacities by designing and implementing projects intended to create positive change within the community. Fellows receive a $5,000 award, form relationships with faculty mentors, and participate in weekly leadership development sessions during which they form a close-knit cohort and workshop their projects. In addition to their award, Fellows receive project expense funding of up to $1,000. Interested Fellows are also eligible for automatic acceptance into the Lawyer-Leadership Seminar and/or Public Education Policy Lab.

With the generous support of Experienced Practitioner **Michael H. Ullmann '83**, in 2025–2026, the Initiative was able to offer additional Fellowship slots for students with strong project proposals related to in-house counsel practice or health care law.

2025–2026 FELLOWS

ZeSean Ali ’28



ZeSean Ali ’28 developed an immensely successful pilot series of HealPolitik, an initiative to foster cross-partisan dialogue at the Law School. During Spring 2026, ZeSean facilitated multiple dinner conversations with a politically and ideologically diverse group of participants who discussed a different divisive topic at each event. Despite approaching issues from wildly opposing perspectives, the participants reported that the conversations, which became “truly emotional and vulnerable,” helped them “learn . . . about how other people feel . . . and find common ground.” Starting in Fall 2026, ZeSean has continued his work in partnership with the University’s Trust Collaboratory.

Faculty Mentors: Professor Clare Huntington, Professor Reilly Steel



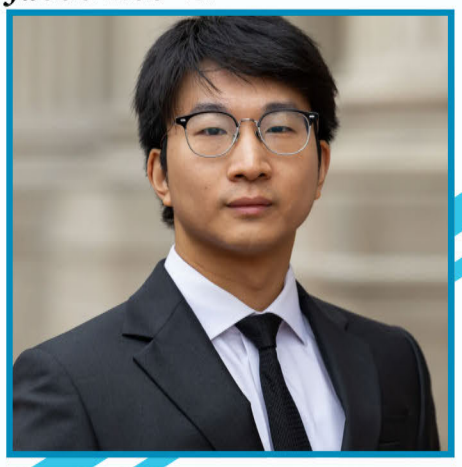
Hannah Dimas ’28

Hannah Dimas ’28 created a curriculum for Native youth that centers Tribal voices and provides accessible legal knowledge about Tribal sovereignty and federal Indian law, with the aim of fostering advocacy, leadership, and empowerment in protecting Indigenous communities. She plans to continue outreach to schools and organizations for adoption of the curriculum in the Fall.

Faculty Mentors: Professor Precious Benally, Professor James Liebman

2025-2026 FELLOWS

Jacob Lee '27



Mackenzie Berwick '28



Mackenzie Berwick '28, Joanna Zhang '28, and Jacob Lee '27 launched Leading in AI, an initiative focused on helping the Law School thoughtfully adapt to the rise of AI by engaging key stakeholders and synthesizing their perspectives on the future of legal education and AI policy. In partnership with Student Services and Student Senate, the group administered a school-wide survey to gather data on community exposure to, experiences with, and attitudes about AI. The data formed the basis for a report shared with Dean Daniel Abebe, Associate Dean Andrea Saavedra, and the Faculty AI Task Force. With the data in mind, the group hosted a student roundtable to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, thoughts, and needs on AI use at the Law School and in legal practice. The group plans to continue its engagement with students through future roundtables and additional data collection, and will continue working with the faculty and the administration on the future of AI at the Law School.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Gillian Lester



Joanna Zhang '28

2025–2026 FELLOWS



Azher Jaheed ’27



Samuel Nechi ’27

Azher Jaweed ’27 and Samuel Nechi ’27 formed a partnership with a local community organization, Be Well Bro, to implement “Socratic Chess”, an early youth intervention program that uses chess, negotiation tactics, and gamification to teach leadership, strategy, and communication skills. As part of Be Well Bro’s Saturday programming, Azher and Sam began teaching their curriculum to children each week during Spring 2026 and developed a pilot web-based video game that teaches negotiation skills. Azher and Sam are working with a pro bono team at Sidley Austin LLP to establish Socratic Chess as a 501 (c)(3) organization in order to continue scaling their work in partnership with local communities.
Faculty Mentor: Susan Sturm

Kuo Jiao ’28 and Neelam Sandhu ’28 began developing the In-House Counsel Launch Pad, an initiative to support the needs of Columbia Law students interested in pursuing in-house legal careers. The Fellows developed and administered a survey to gather data on students’ familiarity with and requests for educational and professional opportunities on in-house careers, and they are partnering with the Law School’s Professional Affairs Administration to develop an introductory event for incoming 1L students in the Fall.
Faculty Mentor: Avery Katz



Kuo Jiao ’28



Neelam Sandhu ’28

2025-2026 FELLOWS

Maria Eliana Pereira LL.M. ’26



Sylvia Julius LL.M. ’26



Drishti Das LL.M. ’26, Maria Eliana Pereira LL.M. ’26, and Sylvia Julius LL.M.’ 26 designed BookBuilder, a business development accelerator for law students to prepare for success in private practice through practical insights into key business-generating and strategic skills that go beyond technical legal expertise. The group developed and hosted a workshop series in Spring 2026 focused on cultivating concrete professional skills and contacts.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Lynnise Pantin



Drishti Das LL.M. ’26

2025–2026 FELLOWS

Sarah Lee ’28 created a student group for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program to train students to become IRS-certified tax preparers and provide free tax preparation services to low-income New Yorkers, giving students meaningful direct client experience while also addressing community needs. Twenty-four students, who became IRS-certified under Sarah’s guidance, worked with local community organizations Ariva, Community Tax Aid, and the International Rescue Committee to provide over 120 pro bono hours in tax preparation assistance this past filing season. In the coming year, Sarah will continue training new students for IRS certification, and is also working towards setting up an official VITA site on Columbia campus.

Faculty Mentors: Professor Michael Love, Professor Alex Raskolnikov



Sarah Lee ’28

2026–2027 FELLOWS

Emara Saez ’28



Devianna Smith ’28



Emara Saez ’28, Jasmine Lorenzo ’28, Devianna Smith ’28, and Lara Werneck ’28 are developing a community-centered initiative to empower immigrant survivors of gender-based violence. Recognizing that language barriers and mistrust of institutions can prevent marginalized individuals from seeking assistance, the project aims to bridge the gap between available resources and the communities that need them. Through relationships with trusted community partners and accessible, discreet resource materials, the fellows aim to create new pathways to uplift New York’s immigrant communities. By distributing legal knowledge, including Know Your Rights trainings, into informal community settings where individuals feel more comfortable, the initiative aims to develop a model of community outreach grounded in trust, cultural awareness, and empowerment that can be adapted across different community settings.
Faculty Mentor: Professor Susan Sturm



Jasmine Lorenzo ’28



Lara Werneck ’28

2026–2027 FELLOWS

Parsva Shah ’28



Aditya Sehgal ’28



Cihan Sahin ’28, Aditya Sehgal ’28, and Parsva Shah ’28, will lead CLIMB (Columbia Law Initiative for Mentorship across Boroughs), a student-led initiative connecting Columbia Law students with New Yorkers considering law school, wherever they are starting from. The project addresses a persistent gap in access to the profession: knowledge about law school admissions, financing, and legal careers often travels through personal networks that many aspiring lawyers never have. Through Pre-Law Preparedness Sessions at partner colleges across the city and a year-end CLIMB Summit at Columbia Law School, this initiative will offer honest, practical guidance and individualized support. In doing so, it will give Columbia Law students meaningful opportunities to lead and mentor while building a lasting bridge between the Law School and New Yorkers across all five boroughs.
Faculty mentor to be confirmed.



Cihan Sahin ’28

2026–2027 FELLOWS

Laila Rodenbeck ’29



Raphael Angieri ’29



Laila Rodenbeck ’29, Raphael Angieri ’29, Nicole Chávez ’29, and Kaylie Moropoulos ’29 will build the Street Vendor Rights Initiative (SVRI). SVRI will support immigrant street vendors in Morningside Heights and Harlem as they seek to exercise their rights, navigate an evolving regulatory landscape, and respond to immigration and labor-related threats. Combining a “Know Your Rights” educational campaign with bi-directional community engagement, student programming, and partnerships with practitioners in the field, SVRI aims to establish a locally focused immigrant-worker rights resource at Columbia Law School.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Elora Mukherjee



Kaylie Moropoulos ’29



Nicole Chávez ’29

2026–2027 FELLOWS

Kendall Krantz ’28



Kendall Krantz ’28 and William Wu ’28 are creating “Exclusive Dealings,” an antitrust-focused platform building on the innovative work of the Center for Law and the Economy. The project focuses on building students’ confidence and capacity as antitrust lawyers. Students will participate in the cutting edge of antitrust thought leadership while building the skills necessary to lead the industry after graduation. This project aims to grow a community improving economic conditions and equality.
Faculty Mentor: Lev Menand



William Wu ’28

2026–2027 FELLOWS

Samuel Winegar ’29 will focus on reducing food insecurity among active-duty service members by aligning conflicting Department of Defense and federal rules governing food donation, combining his experience navigating military regulations with his passion for common-sense approaches to societal problems. The project is designed to equip participating Columbia Law students with both the information and advocacy skills necessary to engage their elected representatives on desired legislative action. **Faculty mentor to be confirmed.**



Samuel Winegar ’29

LAWYER LEADERSHIP

Lawyer Leadership, the Initiative's signature course, is an interactive Spring seminar that cultivates student leadership capacities. In addition to participating in a seminar and lab, each student works in a group to design and implement a project to effect positive change in the community. The projects from Spring 2026 included:

- **CLS Leading in AI Adaptation**, an expansion of the DPLI Leading in AI project that engaged in stakeholder interviews with legal practitioners and AI developers (including a Skadden partner, the managing partner of a large international law firm, and the Head of Product Innovation at Harvey AI), with the aim of translating stakeholder perspectives into proposals for actionable pathways for AI policy and programming within the Law School.

- **CLS J.D. International Guide,** a resource website and guide for compiling and sharing practical information for international J.D. students, many of whom are unfamiliar with the formal and informal knowledge available to domestic J.D. students, and many of whom have additional needs unique to international students with respect to housing, travel, and work eligibility in New York.

LAWYER LEADERSHIP

- **Bridging the Bar,** a toolkit aimed at gathering relevant resources and alumni stories about the job market in order to support J.D. and LL.M. students in navigating and adapting to a fast-changing professional landscape.

- **Pipeline in Practice:** First-Gen Women in Law, a network and mentorship project focused on making the pathway to law school more accessible and navigable for first-generation undergraduate students at Columbia and Barnard.

- **SafePathways,** a student-centered digital hub consolidating and explaining resources available to Columbia University students experiencing intimate partner violence or domestic violence, with respect to their legal rights, support options, and potential pathways forward.

- **Know Your Rights Workshop,** developed and hosted in partnership with the Columbia Law School Immigrants' Rights Clinic, whose student attorneys led a training on how students can exercise their constitutional rights in response to ICE activity on campus, and provided a streamlined resource list for attendees.

- **Catalyzing Change,** a toolkit intended to provide Law School students with insights and resources on effective project management and group leadership skills, as well as practical resources on navigating the logistical considerations of event-planning and project creation at the Law School.

2025–2026 PROGRAMMING

- **GC Leadership Workshop with Mike Ullmann: AI Automation and the Human Workforce.** Based on unanimously positive feedback on similar events in past years, the Initiative hosted a simulation with **Michael H. Ullmann '83**, retired General Counsel at Johnson & Johnson and current DPLI Experienced Practitioner in Residence. Mike facilitated an interactive workshop on the timely topic of decisions leaders must make about their employment practices in a world that increasingly turns to AI automation. Nearly 100 students registered and attended the workshop, during which participants divided into teams to work through an AI-related case study guided by Mike.

- **Designing Your Recipe for Success in Law and Life: A Leadership Conversation for Private Practice.** In partnership with the Office of Private Sector Careers (OPSC), and the Columbia Business and Law Association (CBLA), DPLI hosted a lunch panel with **Joanne De Silva** (DPLI Experienced Practitioner in Residence and CLS Lecturer in Law) in conversation with a law firm partner and an associate on their approaches for sustaining successful practices and thriving lives. Over 150 students registered for the event, with an extra room and video feed added to accommodate audience overflow.

- **Student AI Roundtable.** DPLI Fellows **Mackenzie Berwick '28, Joanna Zhang '28,** and **Jacob Lee '27** hosted a roundtable event during which they facilitated a discussion among student representatives from all class years to discuss challenges with AI use, expectations for governance, and perspectives on the Law School's interim AI policy.

2025–2026 PROGRAMMING

- **BookBuilder Workshops.** DPLI Fellows **Drishti Das LL.M. ’26, Maria Eliana Pereira LL.M. ’26,** and **Sylvia Julius LL.M. ’26** hosted a series of events in connection with their project (described above):

  The Lawyer’s Business Development Toolkit. BookBuilder invited Deborah Farone, a former Cravath business development and communications chief, to give a fireside chat on the fundamentals of business development, the difference between rainmaking and client service, and how students can learn how to build their capacity for networking, relationship-building, and cross-selling.

  From Associate to Partner: Lunch Panel. BookBuilder hosted a career panel with law firm partners in transactional practice to discuss how young lawyers can learn to originate business, anticipate client needs in M&A, private equity, and restructuring contexts, and translate complex regulatory and financial developments into actionable client strategies.

  Professional Etiquette Workshop. BookBuilder invited Marsha Diamond, Ph.D., the Associate Director of Career Advising at the Law School, to give a workshop on a typical day in the life of a law firm associate, with an emphasis on etiquette training for students entering professional practice for the first time.

- **ZeSean Ali ’28** led multiple discussion based small groups for HealPolitik (see page 9). Starting in Fall 2026, ZeSean has continued his work in partnership with the University’s Trust Collaboratory.

LOOKING AHEAD

- **Lawyer Leadership**, a 5-credit experiential course, will be offered again in the Spring. Applications are being reviewed on a rolling basis.

- In partnership with the **Director of Externships and Placement-Based Learning**, the Initiative is developing a leadership and professionalism skills workshop for students who will have externship placements in the spring semester.

- **Michael H. Ullmann '83** is currently offering **The Role of the General Counsel as a Legal and Business Leader**, a seminar in which students gain hands-on experience in practicing leadership skills and form connections with practicing in-house lawyers.

- **Mr. Ullmann** hosted a **General Counsel Leadership Workshop** on October 27, during which students worked through a case study on navigating the relationship between a general counsel and a CEO. He will host another interactive workshop on ethical leadership and crisis management in Spring 2027.

THANK YOU!

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