



**Columbia Alumni Association
Task Force on Belonging**

Report and Recommendations

June 4, 2021

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
OF THE CAA TASK FORCE ON BELONGING**

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INTRODUCTION

The Columbia Alumni Association (CAA)'s mission is to cultivate a uniquely Columbia environment in which diverse, impactful opportunities inspire students and alumni to engage, exchange, and experience the lifelong benefits of our University community.

Since its inception in 2005, the CAA has focused on being an environment where all alumni, students, and members of the broader Columbia community feel welcome, and where all engagement opportunities (e.g., events and programs, volunteer roles and entities, and communications/outreach) reflect and celebrate both everyone individually and the community as a whole. As the Columbia alumni community continues to grow and approaches 390,000 members, this continues to be a core tenet of the organization. At its January 2020 retreat, the Board made "belonging" the most significant priority for CAA leadership and resolved to create the CAA Task Force on Belonging (Task Force).

The Task Force's work was scheduled to begin in March 2020. However, external forces in our community and world delayed the initiative while also amplifying its importance. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the CAA, as well as the rest of the world, to stop in its tracks and reimagine every aspect of the organization in the name of health and safety. It was in this time that virtual programming went from a novel idea that was executed periodically, to the principal way that individuals could interact with each other and their alma mater. While launching and offering virtual programming was challenging, it did create opportunities to engage individuals who would or could not actively engage with the CAA in the past. The overwhelming feelings of isolation and lack of camaraderie shared by many, alongside the increase in home-bound leisure time, made it more crucial than ever for alumni to feel connected to Columbia and each other and for the CAA to offer easily accessible programs.

The spring of 2020 was marked by frequent acts of racism and violence which garnered extensive public attention. While hatred was felt by members of many historically marginalized groups, it was a particularly tumultuous time for the Black and Asian and Pacific Islander communities. The Asian and Pacific Islander community was targeted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic while the Black community had to grapple with the deaths of many individuals, including Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, who died at the hands of police. With so many members of the alumni community feeling so much pain—set against a backdrop of racism, xenophobia, and isolation—it was more important than ever that all Columbians felt safe, heard and represented.

After several benchmarking discussions with peer institutions and internal reviews of current processes, the Task Force began in earnest in the summer of 2020.

Following the execution of two sets of focus groups, individual conversations and a survey process including nearly 90,000 alumni, the Task Force assembled the following five overarching recommendations:

- Enhance engagement and feelings of belonging through segmented programmatic offerings.
- Ensure strategic planning and cross-collaboration across programmatic and volunteer efforts, especially amongst segmented groups and clubs, to build a stronger sense of unity with volunteers and alumni overall.
- Increase awareness of existing programmatic and volunteer opportunities as well as brand recognition of the benefits of engagement with the University and CAA.

- Continue to gather and utilize data to understand why alumni do and do not participate in CAA engagement opportunities.
- Continually assess the effectiveness of initiatives to ensure broad community inclusion and representation in all events and programs, communications and volunteer opportunities.

While the Task Force is very proud of the work that has led to the aforementioned recommendations, the group intends to remain in formation for an additional year to continue its work and ensure the initial adoption of these recommendations.

TASK FORCE PREPARATION AND COMPOSITION

Prior to convening the Task Force and in order to attain benchmarks for the Task Force’s work, the CAA administrative team undertook an analysis of best practices across several peer institutions. (APPENDIX A) In addition to reviewing the work of peer institutions (APPENDIX B), the CAA administrators met with Columbia partners from the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Office of University Life to better understand the resources that are available on campus that could be utilized to complete the work of the Task Force.

Once constituted, the Task Force created a roadmap to guide its fact-finding and discussions for the academic year (APPENDIX C). The composition of the 23-member Task Force included three Trustees, several CAA Board members, a representation of Global Clubs/Shared Interest Groups (SIGs) leadership, School-based leaders, and student and administrative representatives. (APPENDIX D) While broad in its composition, the scope of work was focused exclusively on CAA efforts and engagement opportunities. It is, however, understood that many of the recommendations in this report may also have relevance to our School-based partners.

The Task Force was empowered to assess all CAA initiatives and to formulate recommendations that could be utilized by the CAA Board and its Strategic Planning Committee to create a stronger and more focused commitment to building an organization welcoming to all by formulating intentional and actionable strategies.

The stated purpose of the Task Force is to “ensure that the Columbia Alumni Association and all of its related entities are accurately representative of, are welcoming to, foster a sense of belonging for, amplify the voices of and create a space for all members of the Columbia alumni community”. This purpose was set with the intention of empowering the task force to consider all alumni experiences yet focus its analysis and recommendations exclusively on the work of the CAA, rather than additional areas of the University or any individual School.

METHODOLOGY AND CONTENT

The Task Force met six times throughout the course of the 2020-2021 academic year. Between meetings, the administrative team met to debrief on the content of the previous meeting, and smaller groups of Task Force members were convened for more individualized feedback and perspectives. The meetings served as an opportunity for members to share their own experiences and those of alumni with whom they’ve interacted, provide feedback on topics/findings presented, and continue to define what belonging means to alumni. During the second semester of the 2020-2021 academic year, the content of the meetings shifted to an analysis of the research findings, and the formulation of recommendations for their report.

It is crucial to note that throughout this process “engagement” refers to attending events, volunteering time, giving philanthropically, participating in surveys, and all the additional ways alumni remain connected with the University through either the School from which they graduated, other Schools at Columbia, or the CAA.

The primary research components consisted of a survey tool and several iterations of focus groups. Additionally, an audit of current CAA communications and critique of CAA programs and volunteer structure were undertaken (APPENDIX E).

An alumni survey was developed in collaboration with the Office of Alumni and Development (OAD)'s marketing research team (APPENDIX F). It was sent to a 70,000 person representative cross-sectioned random sample of the alumni population. Prior to the survey's distribution, focus groups composed of alumni who engaged with the University between July 2019 and October 2020 were conducted to determine and confirm key areas to be addressed (APPENDIX G, H). Following the initial distribution of the survey, it was sent to a second pool of 18,650 alumni. A subsection of these alumni had been included in the original pool, but distribution channels for this second group included the listservs of the identity-based SIGs (such as Black Alumni Council and Columbia Pride), to elicit a broader diversity of responses that was more representative of the Columbia alumni population as a whole. Leaders of identity-based SIGs were also given the opportunity to share feedback on their experiences with the CAA (APPENDIX I, J). Finally, an additional set of focus groups gave survey respondents an opportunity to share feedback on the survey findings. This feedback was considered by the OAD marketing research team in the crafting of their initial recommendations which were presented to the Task Force (APPENDIX K).

Between both the first and second (APPENDIX L) and the fourth and fifth Task Force meetings (APPENDIX M), members were invited to participate in small group discussions to further analyze and expand upon data and the themes presented to the full group. The takeaways from these sessions assisted in the formulation of the initial Task Force recommendations. In order to ensure that the recommendations were not only based on the feedback of individuals inclined to respond to a survey or participate in a focus group, members and SIG leaders were invited to solicit additional feedback from their personal and volunteer-led Columbia contacts in the form of small group or one-on-one meetings. This feedback was then synthesized and included in the data for this report.

RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

The research yielded feedback from 2,188 alumni, representing all 18 schools and units of the University, through the survey and focus groups. Additionally, 15 alumni participated in small groups or one-on-one conversations facilitated by Task Force members and SIG leaders.

We noted that 80% of all survey respondents reported a general feeling of connectedness with Columbia and 17% of those respondents feel very connected. Additionally, there were varying levels of connectedness reported throughout the focus group conversations. Alumni of differing ethnicities and ages recorded similar connectedness to questions about the CAA and Columbia in the survey. However, there were notable differences based on age regarding more specific statements about belonging. Respondents connected in a variety of ways, ranging from volunteering and attending events, to staying in contact with Columbia classmates and friends. A common theme throughout the research process was that the alumni experience and feelings of belonging are often directly influenced by the student experience.

Conversations with Task Force members, SIG leaders and select survey respondents who participated in focus groups revealed that segmented groups are a pivotal connection for many alumni to both the CAA and the University. That said, respondents from the SIG communities had, relative to the original sample, a stronger connection to the CAA. When asked about information sources in the past two years which promoted feelings of belonging with Columbia, the SIGs sample was 5-10 points lower than the original sample survey respondents on two channels: Columbia email and websites. They were on par with the original sample for their school magazine and *Columbia Magazine*.

The Task Force looks forward to exploring this finding further to understand the reason for this difference. Additionally, while many alumni were very grateful for the opportunities provided by the SIGs to connect with their own community, there was a stated desire for engagement opportunities for all alumni of color, as well as alumni from other historically underrepresented communities.

In the survey, we included a series of statements about being accepted as a Columbia alum, regardless of race and ethnicity and/or socio-economic status. The survey data showed disparities for this question, with 58% of the original sample feeling everyone is accepted regardless of race/ethnicity, versus 22% for Black Alumni Council (BAC) members, 39% for Latino Alumni Association of Columbia University (LAACU) members, and 48% for Asian Columbia Alumni Association (ACAA) members represented in the SIG sample. In terms of economic or social class, 45% of the original survey respondents strongly agree that this has been their experience as a Columbia alum, versus 23% for BAC, 29% for LAACU, and 39% for ACAA SIG respondents.

The role of events as a significant source of belonging was not surprising, especially given the prevalence of virtual programs taking the place of in-person gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic. While alumni were able to give feedback about both virtual and in-person events, the Task Force recognizes that it is challenging to know whether the entirety of respondents' feedback was on virtual or in-person programming, or a combination of both, but the implicit need to continue virtual programs is clear. Survey respondents and focus group participants residing outside of the Tri-State area found virtual programs provided an essential opportunity for engagement as they are unable to attend in-person CAA programs. Even alumni in New York City advocated for continued virtual programming;

"I would appreciate more opportunities where alumnae can do online webinars that involve directly talking to or collaborating with other alumnae." - Hispanic female, 35-44, NYC

77% of survey respondents cited events as increasing their sense of belonging with the greater alumni community. However, it is worth noting that 36% of survey respondents indicated feeling out of place at a Columbia event. Some respondents cited examples such as School-based silos, perceived cliques, experiences of imposter syndrome, and the lack of a personal greeting upon arrival as possible barriers to feeling included and welcomed.

Respondents shared a variety of reasons for not being more engaged with Columbia, including, (*in order of comment frequency*): lack of time, geographic location, lack of awareness of others who may be attending programs, not being aware of what the opportunities are, timing of events, diversity of thought, and diversity of attendees. SIG leaders also shared that while both they and their communities have had generally positive experiences at larger CAA events, some felt these broader programs were not always presented in a format that resonated with and/or featured topics that were relevant to their communities. Alumni would also like to be invited to events that are more closely aligned with their interests and that explore issues from multiple perspectives.

"No community feeling at Columbia in general. It is not about ethnicity, it is about interests. I go to Journalism events and feel welcome." - Black female, 45-54, NYC

"Offer both sides of polarizing issues with equally qualified programming so that we can hear thoughtful perspectives - 360 degrees - around an issue." - White male, 45-54, St. Louis, MO

Similarly to events (83% of respondents cited the CAA events as welcoming), survey participants shared that CAA communications both helped to facilitate connectedness and feelings of belonging but could also create a barrier to inclusion and engagement if they were focused on a particular age demographic. Many respondents noted that, while they appreciate the communications they receive, they often find it difficult to distinguish

whether messages are coming from the CAA or another University entity. Additionally, alumni were especially engaged with messages that were intellectual and targeted based on interest. While 83% of the total respondents said email helps them feel they belong to Columbia, younger alumni feel that social media also promotes strong feelings of belonging. There were 86% of respondents that cited *Columbia Magazine* as promoting positive feelings of belonging to the University. This was the highest (most positive) ranking for any communication vehicle.

Comments about current CAA communications offered several important insights including a desire for more stories about “everyday” alumni and less emphasis on “superstars.”

“I feel that many of the people featured in the Columbia Magazine are the superheroes and best and brightest. While I enjoy reading about them, it reminds me that I am made to feel ordinary and not one of those superheroes. I imagine many of us alumni are living our lives, doing our best, have good jobs that we are proud of but we don't invent things or write award-winning books. Maybe some of what is offered through the Alumni association could be to highlight alumni who are proud of their situation but are middle- class, everyday people...There is an elitism that was there when I attended Columbia and frankly, in those days, that elitism was the reason to attend. But now it is suffocating.” - Asian female, 45-54, Long Island, NY

They also shared that the way events and opportunities are communicated can have an impact.

“I frequently question whether I am welcome at Columbia events even though I am absolutely devoted to Columbia. Something about the way it is marketed always feels like it is a closed club and I am intruding.” - White female, 45-54, Bronx, NY

Respondents also reported that appropriate representation illustrating ethnicity, race, family makeup, ability, and age diversity is crucial to ensuring alumni connect with messaging.

Beyond the insights gleaned on the impact events and communications have had on feelings of belonging, volunteerism was also analyzed. Task Force members and SIG leaders shared that the opportunity to volunteer, especially for SIGs, Global Clubs, and CAA Board committees had a positive impact on their feelings of belonging. Additionally, SIG leaders in particular, shared that lead volunteers of their groups were significantly connected to the CAA and its major initiatives such as task forces, signature events and programs including Columbia Alumni Leaders Weekend (CALW)/Columbia Alumni Leaders Experience (CALE) , CU there!, Columbia Connects, and University-wide initiatives such as Giving Day. SIG leaders also shared that their own initiatives, such as spotlighting their members in communications, personal outreach, listening sessions, and the ability to make informed decisions based on constituent feedback, increase feelings of belonging. Survey respondents shared that participating in efforts through Global Clubs and SIGs as well as ‘done in a day’ volunteer opportunities helped to increase their feelings of belonging and sense of community. Additionally, respondents noted a desire for opportunities to work with the CAA to co-create experiences for fellow alumni.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force has assembled five overarching recommendations based on the aforementioned findings. In order to fulfill these recommendations, the Task Force is putting forth both tasks that will have a finite completion (and will consistently be reviewed and maintained) as well as longer term considerations which will require cultural changes within the CAA. There are also considerations to be assessed and led specifically by the CAA Board and its Strategic Planning Committee. Collaboration between University Alumni Relations staff, CAA Board members and alumni leaders will be paramount to the execution of these recommendations.

1. Enhance engagement and feelings of belonging through segmented programmatic offerings.

a. Create a programmatic plan to engage alumni from segments of the community that are often disengaged, including mid-career alumni, recent alumni, retired alumni and alumni with young families. Additionally, execute one or two CAA-wide events annually that highlight the intersectionality in addition to the diversity of heritages and cultures represented throughout the Columbia alumni community.

b. Encourage alumni to form connections with each other at large-scale programs. This can be done at in-person programs by instituting ice breakers, volunteer greeters, and facilitators for peer-to-peer introductions. Connections of this manner can be created through virtual programs by encouraging all event organizers to employ moderated breakout rooms and/or follow up discussions.

The Task Force recommends the CAA Board consider the following:

c. Engender feelings of connectedness with and visibility of the CAA Board by ensuring that the majority of programs executed by the CAA, regardless of size and lead organizers, have a CAA board presence.

d. Encourage School-based diversity at all programs by working with School-based alumni directors and alumni leaders to develop roles for School-based liaisons to populate the leadership teams of SIGs/Global Clubs/Arts Access.

2. Ensure strategic planning and cross-collaboration across programmatic and volunteer efforts, especially among segmented groups and clubs, to build a stronger sense of unity with volunteers and alumni overall.

a. Develop an overall set of goals and objectives including enhanced regular collaboration of SIGs through a committee-based effort.

b. Identify themes for one to three All-SIG, volunteer-driven, signature events annually.

c. Empower the Recent Alumni and Student Relations Committee (RASR) to collaborate with leaders of the Student Leadership Advisory Council (SLAC) and the Student Affairs Committee of the University Senate (SAC) to create an engagement plan that ensures students are aware of CAA opportunities for engagement and for RASR and SLAC to support and participate in student initiatives, where appropriate.

d. Encourage segmented groups to identify a lead volunteer to focus on collaborations that build unity across all organizations and CAA-led efforts.

e. Strengthen lines of communications with Tri-State alumni and University partners to engage local alumni with the University through on-campus events as well as both volunteer and staff driven-programs of the CAA.

The Task Force recommends the CAA Board consider the following:

f. Leverage relationships Board members have with University-wide and School-based partners to increase awareness of CAA SIG and Global Club programmatic and volunteer opportunities

3. Increase awareness of existing programmatic and volunteer opportunities as well as brand recognition of the benefits of being engaged with the University and CAA.

- a. Charge leaders from the SIGs, Global Clubs, Alumnae Leadership Group, and Student Leadership Advisory Council, as well as leaders from Schools and units across the University, with creating a CAA events and engagement communication plan. This plan will be used to ensure members of each of the aforementioned groups are consistently aware of and promoting programs for each other and the CAA, volunteer opportunities, and virtual programs and event archives. Similarly, the CAA will continue broadly promoting the work of these groups.
- b. Create an alumni spotlight in the CAA's monthly newsletter. This storytelling vehicle will showcase the diversity of the CAA volunteer community, ways alumni can become engaged and reasons why alumni choose to engage and stay involved.
- c. Since many alumni are unaware of the variety of topic-based or niche programs offered by the CAA and School-based partners, develop and implement a marketing/brand recognition plan to better inform the overall alumni audience about how to participate in such programs, both online and in-person.
- d. Social media platforms are consistently evolving and changing. Assess the CAA's social media strategy to determine new or different opportunities to engage alumni. This will be ongoing.

4. Continue to gather and utilize data to understand why alumni do and do not participate in CAA engagement opportunities.

- a. Anecdotal data has been crucial to the work of the Task Force. Continue to understand alumni feelings of belonging through pop-up surveys and Alumni Voices, to use to understand how these feelings change over time.
- b. Analyze current and past engagement trends to enable the CAA to do more targeted outreach to individuals that have been intermittently engaged.
- c. Administer a Survey on Belonging on a biennial basis that will allow us to assess whether or not general feelings of belonging are increasing throughout the alumni community. Share findings and actions taken to give alumni the opportunity to understand the impact of sharing their feedback.
- d. Create an opportunity for students to approve their data being transferred from student records to the alumni database.
- e. Establish a baseline metric that will enable the tracking of alumni participation across segmented programs.

The Task Force recommends the CAA Board consider the following:

- f. Encourage increased data collection and analysis by working with School-based alumni directors and both School-based and CAA alumni leaders to ensure comprehensive documentation of alumni engagement information.

5. Continually assess the effectiveness of initiatives to ensure broad community inclusion and representation in all events and programs, communications, and volunteer opportunities.

a. At the onset of the Task Force’s work, a review of all CAA communications, programs and practices (volunteer recruitment, etc.) was conducted. Formalize this process and execute it on an annual basis.

The Task Force recommends the CAA Board consider the following:

b. Empower all volunteers and staff to enhance the inclusivity of the CAA. This is imperative and will require training. The Columbia Alumni Leaders Experience can be utilized to raise awareness of the issues identified in this report and provide training in the methods that can be used to promote feelings of belonging.

c. The development of a CAA community standard for inclusive engagement will define the expectations of all volunteers and staff as it relates to ensuring that all alumni feel that the CAA is a community in which they belong. This standard will be created based on the input and support of the Task Force as well as the CAA’s partners.

METRICS FOR SUCCESS

While analysis of the self-reported survey and focus group perspectives has largely shaped the Task Force’s recommendations, quantitative figures, in addition to qualitative data, will be utilized in determining their success. In alignment with the CAA 2023 five-year plan’s metrics for success, additional measures will be considered in the creation of CAA 2027, the next five-year plan which will commence in July 2022. These metrics should include but not be limited to:

1. Improved overall feelings of belonging as determined by subsequent surveys
2. Number of individuals who participate, participate for the first time, or move to engaged alum status through their participation in the following initiatives:
 - 2a. attending in-person and virtual CAA programs
 - 2b. attending SIG individual and collaborative events
 - 2c. participating in pop-up surveys/Alumni Voices
 - 2d. volunteering through belonging-focused positions
3. Number of students engaging with the CAA and its segmented efforts
4. Students engaged with the CAA who continue engaging as alumni
5. Number of individuals participating in CAA’s segmented efforts

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Task Force is confident that the implementation of the recommendations in this report will result in a stronger sense of belonging across our community. However, there is still much work to be done, and the Task Force, with the addition of new members to further represent the diversity of the alumni body, recommends it remain in formation through the 2021-2022 academic year.

The next phase of work will focus on the creation of subcommittees to carry out the recommendations set forth in this report. Additionally, the Task Force will ensure that its work, as well as the findings from the preliminary

survey, are shared with University and CAA leadership and the overall alumni community through the CAA newsletter and other alumni communications.

The Task Force recognizes the impact that virtual programming has had on the engagement of alumni throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Online programs will continue to be valuable in the future—particularly for engaging new alumni, especially those outside of the geographic areas where in-person programs will be held. Virtual programs have also helped to engage those alumni whose accessibility to in-person programming is limited based on numerous other factors. The Task Force recommends that the CAA board consider the importance of continuing virtual and hybrid programming to maintain the engagement of these individuals.

Finally, the Task Force is eager to see belonging as a consistent theme throughout the entirety of the upcoming CAA five-year strategic plan. We believe this will create a stronger commitment to goals of belonging and inclusivity than if these matters were condensed into a single goal.

The Task Force is proud to have been part of this process and looks forward to continuing to work to ensure that all alumni feel safe, welcome and integral to the CAA.