

## ROBERT POLLACK, TANNENBAUM-WARNER AWARDEE

The University Seminars 78<sup>th</sup> Annual Dinner | May 7, 2025

To begin, my thanks to Seminars Director Susan Boynton, my Tannenbaum-Warner Awardee predecessor, Alice Newton, our colleagues here tonight who serve on the Executive Committee of The University Seminars, and Susan's entire office staff, especially Pamela Guardia—whose efforts in organizing this event have been feats of strength and grace—for choosing me as this year's recipient of the Tannenbaum-Warner Award. The honor is great, and it obligates me to speak seriously in the amount of time I have.

Columbia is at a crossroads. Our original purpose was the transformation of other people's kids into adults who could hear as well as speak; who could therefore lead others by argument, not intimidation; and who could balance their impulses of self-importance with impulses of empathy and concern for others, emerging from their experiences in the classroom. This is what a college education here has meant for most, if not all, of our almost 250 years as an institution of higher learning.

The Columbia College faculty's invention of the Core Curriculum over a previous century—Contemporary Civilization in 1919, Literature Humanities in 1937, Frontiers of Science in 2008—remains at the center of this original purpose. It is a curriculum of seminars built around iconic books, artworks, scientific discoveries, and music that every College undergraduate must engage upon arrival here and complete before declaring his or her major. It continues to ensure that the choice of a future career will be made in an informed context, and neither by the urge nor the obligation to copy others, whether by ones' parents or ones' classmates.

The University Seminars—proposed by Professor Frank Tannenbaum to President Butler in the 1930s—have a similar ancestry, with the first five seminars emerging during World War Two, under the aegis of Acting President Fackenthal. The Seminars have a similar function as well, assuring that colleagues from a wide range of fields and degrees of expertise have the chance to listen to each other, and thereby to teach and learn from each other, often in unexpected ways.

I can still remember with great feeling, the sense of acceptance that followed the response of my Humanities A instructor—a newly minted assistant professor just arrived from Princeton, by the name of Robert Belknap—to my question about *Crime and Punishment*. He told the class my point was an important one, worth the class's time to discuss it. It gave me a sense of belonging at Columbia, even though for the most part my time was spent in the lab.

The University's second purpose—emerging and blossoming after WWII—has been to apply the knowledge base and the new discoveries of the sciences made by our faculty to social needs, in exchange for support from our federal government. This second purpose began with the Manhattan Project, which was, in its initial state, located in the basement of Pupin.

I entered Columbia College in 1957, not that long after Dwight Eisenhower had gone from Commander of Allied armies in WWII, to the founder of NATO, to Fackenthal's successor as

Columbia University President, to President of the United States. My entire career has been the product of this second purpose, while at the same time my entire life has been the product of that first purpose.

With regard to the second purpose, my parents could not have afforded my becoming a Columbia College student but for the facts that I was a physics nerd, and that when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in the late 1950s, New York's Governor Rockefeller doubled the amount of the New York State scholarship that I had won, from \$125 to \$250, for students who would agree to study physics. This allowed my parents to come up with the \$150 difference that allowed them to pay the tuition which was, in 1957, \$400.

I had to work, as well, of course. I became a tech in the Radiation Lab in Pupin, which had invented airborne radar under the direction of Isador Rabi during the war, and which had just become the site of the discovery of coherent radiation, the source of today's lasers, by my boss at that time, a graduate student named Arno Penzias. Rabi had received his Nobel Prize by then, and Penzias got his a few decades later, after receiving his PhD from Columbia, for using coherent radiation technology to discover the residual background radiation of the Big Bang, a three-degree background radiation that has filled the universe since it emerged as the universe itself did, some three billion years ago.

My life changed forever when I met Amy in my senior year. As embedded as I was in science by my senior year, Amy was an equally dedicated artist who was graduating from Cooper Union. It was rapidly apparent to us both, that what we had in common was not grounded in our work but in our souls, and that we could hope to begin a life together that would be of our own making.

We planned to start that life together by marrying as soon as possible after we had both graduated, in late 1961. I then began my graduate career in the fall of 1961 by choosing to be a biologist rather than a physicist—no surprise—and by being accepted—with no biology courses—as a PhD student by the Biology Department of Brandeis University.

From then until 1978, when I returned to Columbia as a tenured professor of biology, I was immersed in research that rapidly centered around the discovery I made as a postdoctoral fellow in Pathology at New York University Medical Center: cells of a tumor reproducibly include a small minority of normal, revertant, cells among their descendants. That line of research led me from NYU to Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, where the Director, James Watson, had asked me to set up a lab to study reversion. From there I was recruited to join the Columbia University Biology Department as a tenured professor in 1978.

Upon returning to Columbia the first purpose caught me up once again.

I was one of the faculty of the College who pressed for inclusion of the sciences in the Core Curriculum, and for the inclusion of women in the College's student body. I became the Dean of the College in 1982, reorganizing the College's policies with the support and approval of the faculty of the College, so that women would be half of the students admitted, and so that I could make my first fundraising priority the collection of enough funds from alumni to assure need-blind

admissions, thereby bringing a greater diversity of student backgrounds to the College, along with coeducation.

I stepped down as Dean in 1989—when the faculty of the College was merged with the faculties of the Graduate School, the School of General Studies and the School of the Arts to become the faculty of Arts and Sciences. Years later, in 2011, I became the Director of The University Seminars, Bob Belknap’s successor. Belknap was always my teacher as well as my friend, and that long-term connection to others is, to me, the most important reason to nurture, foster, protect, and expand the role of undergraduate education here in our university. To do so, I can think of no better model to build upon, than one that would serve the first purpose of the University, which gave rise to both the Core Curriculum and The University Seminars.

Just for example, think how wonderful it might be, if we could extract the faculty of the College from the current faculty of Arts and Sciences that now also includes many who do not teach any College courses, and then admit to it any tenure-track faculty member from any of Columbia’s dozen or so graduate and professional schools, who would wish to teach in any of our College’s Core Curriculum courses. That would redirect our priorities back to our first purpose, allow us to staff all our Core seminar sections with tenure track faculty, and to intellectually diversify and deepen the Core Curriculum, while making it available to all Columbia University undergraduates, as we navigate this period of great existential uncertainty.

I will close with a story of my 60-year friendship with Bob Belknap. About fifteen years ago, when he would be using the office we gave him in the basement of Faculty House, he came to my Seminars office to talk. As Thanksgiving was approaching, I asked him how many years his family had observed Thanksgiving. As he is a Mayflower descendant, I assumed his answer would be “four hundred or so.” But he said, “Maybe 10,000 years, maybe more; I am not sure.” “Huh?” I replied. “Well,” he said, “you would not want me to remember my Mayflower ancestors and to forget my Native American ones, would you?”

He reminded me then, as I remind us all now, of the importance of continuing to celebrate the diversity of our subjective identities. After all, if DNA-based life teaches us anything, it is that a person’s identity is not the same their ancestry.