

**The University Seminars at 75:**  
**An Ongoing Experiment in Continuity with Novelty**

Foreword by Robert Pollack, PhD

Professor of Biological Sciences, University Seminars Director

In the many years since I have been at Columbia as a Professor of Biology, I have noticed that too often we value novelty above continuity. By novelty I mean the powerful impact of our faculty's ideas and works on the greater world, and our capacity for innovation, and of course the historical accumulation of awards by our faculty. In these ways we celebrate our impact, and why not? But that is not enough. After more than four decades as a Professor here, and after almost a decade as Director of the University Seminars, I have come to believe that we need, in addition, to give as much attention to the simple fact of our continuity, and to celebrate the ways in which that continuity has been maintained.

In particular, those generous people who have over the past few hundred years given Columbia funds for its endowment, which now is among the highest in the country and the world, remain for the most part unknown unless a school or a building has their name on it. But all donors to our University's endowment should be equally thanked for their decision to give us their wealth while they can, so that Columbia may have the funds available to grapple with the problems of the future. In this book we celebrate one such gift. The University Seminars offer a particularly clear example of the difference an endowment can make: ours has allowed us to have half a century of continuity, with novelty emerging at all times.

The University Seminars at 75 is an ongoing experiment in safe conversation among groups of people of all ages and backgrounds, brought together by common interests but never by common conclusions. The Seminars are for that reason also an experiment in the politics of democracy. We cannot take for granted our freedom to disagree without punishment. It is increasingly rare on a global scale, and has recently become more challenged even in our own country. So long as endowments are to be spent according to the wishes of their donors, creative conversations are what we will continue to celebrate.

Seventy-five years ago, as the terrible precedents in human cruelty and violence that were set by World War Two were still emerging, acting University President Frank D. Fackenthal and Professor of Latin American History Frank Tannenbaum, Columbia College class of 1921, founded the Seminars in response to the existential problems they saw emerging from a world at war. University Seminars thus began as a Presidential initiative. After the war ended it persisted as a program that was intended by Professor Tannenbaum to one day become a School within the

University, one that would concentrate its efforts, as the Seminars were designed to do, on existential problems that transcended the boundaries of Columbia's Schools and Departments.

The Seminars existed throughout the Cold War, but it was clear, by the time of the rise of Fidel Castro in Cuba, that Tannenbaum was not going to be simply the dean of a new School. Something I saw as a sophomore in the College from the window of my dorm room on the ninth floor of Hartley Hall, in April 1959, presaged this. As Director of University Seminars and also as the chair of the Seminar on Latin American Studies that he had founded, Tannenbaum had invited Cuba's new President, Fidel Castro, to visit campus during his first trip to our country.

This occurred well before the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the subsequent stand-down between our country and the Soviet Union, and Castro was quite a draw. The steps of Low were packed; one photo from the time captures a smiling Tannenbaum, a serious President Castro, and a rather unhappy University President Grayson Kirk, surrounded by a dense crowd of students. One can see by the expressions on their faces that Tannenbaum was not interested in currying favor with either of his colleagues on those steps.

For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Seminars in 1968, the year before he died, Tannenbaum edited a volume of essays also called *A Community of Scholars*, in which he made clear that University Seminars were not about to become any sort of "Seminars University." When she passed away in 1972, Tannenbaum's widow Jane Belo left Columbia a gift to endow the operation of the University Seminars in his memory. This gift afforded the Seminars a unique position. They could enjoy continuity with a high rate of emergent novelty: that was Tannenbaum's model for the program.

Since then, the Seminars have had fifty years of novelty with creativity as new members, new Seminars, and new Directors have all learned how to make use of the unique creative freedom our endowment was designed to reward and protect. Since I have been around for so long, I am pleased to be able to share a memory of each of my four predecessors; each of us in our own very different manners has managed so far to preserve the Seminars' core value of nurturing novelty.

I never met Frank Tannenbaum, the first Director of University Seminars, who served from its inception in 1944 until his death in 1969. I am sure that if I had met him we would have found a lot to talk about, as we had quite similar backgrounds. We both went to Columbia College soon after devastating wars – World War I in his case and World War II in mine – and we both were the first in our families to graduate from High School.

Professor of Philosophy James Gutmann, Columbia College class of 1918, became the second Director on Frank's death in 1969, and so was the first Director to enjoy the task of managing the yield on the endowment left to the University Seminars a year earlier by the anthropologist Jane Belo, just before her own death in 1968. I returned to Columbia in 1978, getting my PhD and carrying out the research that led Columbia's Biological Sciences Department to offer me a professorship. My wife Amy, our daughter Marya, and I were given an

apartment in a small Columbia building that also was home to Professor Gutmann. I did not know anything of the Seminars then, but I knew him to be a quiet, somewhat intimidating, always polite neighbor.

Professor Aaron Warner, protégé of Frank Tannenbaum and Isadore I. Rabi, was the third Director of Seminars, from 1976 to 2000. Professor Rabi, Nobel Laureate in Physics, was founder of the Radiation Laboratory, where I spent time as an undergraduate. He inculcated in many people, including Professor Warner and me, a deep respect for the social obligation of scientists to do their best to assure that our work was in the interests of society as a whole. Professor Warner had had a distinguished career working for President Roosevelt during the era of the New Deal, and he brought the Seminars to a new commitment to social consciousness. To his credit, he did not bring his own opinions into the Seminars' own choices of topics. And so, under his direction, even as distant a fellow as myself could come to him with a radical notion and find that it would be quite acceptable as a new University Seminar.

So it was that in 1996 I proposed a University Seminar I called "The Two Cultures Revisited: Current Representations of Human Diversity." It was an experiment I had long wished to carry out on myself: what would it be like to share ideas and experiences with colleagues who happened to be women, or gay, or people of color, without us all reverting to presumptions about each other based on these differences?

To give us a scaffolding on which to hang our initially awkward conversations, I arranged that members would take turns choosing a book for us all to discuss. Through these books, we all came to know each other as real people, not representatives of any particular group. The Seminar served its purpose almost immediately, as we all came to see each other through these books we all had read. I remain friends with many of the members of this Seminar, which lasted only a few years, an example of the freedom Seminars has always had to persist, mutate or go senescent as their members may wish.

My Literature Humanities teacher in 1957-58, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures Robert Belknap became the fourth Director of University Seminars, from 2001 to 2011. I have no better way to introduce him here than to tell a story about him that I had originally told at his 2014 memorial service in St. Paul's Chapel: Belknap and I had a conversation just before Thanksgiving 2013. He had invited me to succeed him as Director of University Seminars in 2010-11, and we would often enjoy each other's company in our offices in Faculty House. "Bob," I asked him, "how many years have your family celebrated Thanksgiving?"

Knowing that Belknaps were on the Mayflower, I expected a big number, in the hundreds of years; I waited to bask in the reflected light of his ancestry. "Oh," he said, "about five thousand, or ten thousand years." "How?" I asked. "Well" he said, "you don't think I am going to remember my Mayflower ancestors and not my Native ancestors too, do you?" In that, he taught me how much of our country's history is built on the

forgotten cultures of Native peoples. He also taught me to think again before valuing any of my ancestors over any others, and in the largest sense to remember that as a person, my thoughts, my life, my decisions, my actions define me; not my ancestry, and certainly not my DNA.

I will close this review of my predecessors with a reflection on the remarkable variety of lifetimes that Seminars have had. Three of the first University Seminars to be formed, in the mid 1940s, are still thriving: “Peace,” “Renaissance,” and “Religion.” As I write this I have been Director for eight years. In that time more than a dozen new Seminars have been proposed, discussed by our Advisory Board, approved, and gotten underway. In the same period, almost the same number of seminars have voluntarily taken a year off; those that do not come back after a year are formally decommissioned.

Here is perhaps the best example of the difference between University Seminars and any hypothetical “Seminars University.” Consistent with our founder’s intentions, each Seminar may have its own arc of experience and its own lifetime as well; there is no tenure, no obligation to be permanent, nor even an obligation to be important, only an obligation to be clear and to be willing to listen.

In these different ways, I have learned from each of my predecessors how to protect and preserve the freedom each Seminar has – and the Seminars as a whole enjoy as well – to decide our purposes, our protocols, and our topics for discussion. The hundreds of books and public events that the seminars have supported have all emerged from one or more of the Seminars themselves. Thus they are a permanent but ever-changing monument to the power and freedom Tannenbaum’s and Belo’s vision has passed on to us and through us into the unknowable future.

The University Seminars have never been the product of any director, nor even of their own membership. They have always been served by a cadre of dedicated colleagues who have administered funds, reservations, an archive, meals, and wine, so that each Seminar might have its own life. Let me close by thanking our colleagues who maintain the Faculty House, and those who make our Faculty House office a welcoming and serious place: Alice Newton, Summer Hart, Pamela Guardia, Gesenia Alvarez, and John Jayo. I know they join me in hoping that you will enjoy these essays by our Seminars colleagues.