X i Chen’s latest research idea came to him in the produce aisle—in the form of an acorn squash, to be exact.

Intrigued by why certain fruits and vegetables have particular shapes, Chen—an associate professor of engineering mechanics at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science—wondered, why does an acorn squash, no matter its size or ripeness, always have 10 ridges? Why does a Korean melon have 10, too? Why do bell peppers consistently range between four and six ridges?

Not altogether discounting biology, Chen proposes that a basic engineering principle gives certain vegetables and fruits their distinctive shapes. A structure under pressure, explained Chen, will bend, or in engineering terms, buckle. In the case of the acorn squash, its skin grows faster than the core, but to remain adhered to the core the skin buckles into these familiar ridges.

“It’s always interesting to figure out a simple principle behind a seemingly complicated phenomenon,” said Chen.

This is how Chen, 32, approaches much of his research, which focuses on mechanobiology. Known for inventive research methods, Chen recently received the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers, the highest honor given by the U.S. government.

“Every now and then in life, you get the opportunity to be part of something you can be certain will be remembered for ages to come.”

Columbia Watches One of Its Own Take Office

By Melanie A. Farmer

A crowd of several thousand gathered on the steps of Low Library to watch the inauguration of President Barack Obama, the first Columbia graduate to be elected president of the United States.

Students, faculty members, alumni, staff and community members—even elementary school students from the School at Columbia—watched intensely, with applause and occasional cheers during the ceremony. After Obama took the oath of office, there were more cheers across campus and nearby church bells pealed.

“Every now and then in life, you get the opportunity to be part of something you can be certain will be remembered for ages to come,” Columbia’s president, Lee C. Bollinger, said to the crowd shortly before the ceremony began. “Today the entire world, it seems, is convening to witness the inauguration of President Barack Obama.”

SEAS Professor Wins Presidential Award for Research Discoveries

By Melanie A. Farmer

Chen won a presidential award for his research methods.
INTERDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE BUILDING TOPS OFF

Columbia president Lee C. Bollinger and Joseph Lenox, executive vice president for Facilities, signed the final steel beam for the new Interdisciplinary Science Building atop off ceremony on Dec. 17. Topping off is a construction milestone that marks when a structure reaches its intended height. Located at Broadway and West 120th Street, the 14-story building fills the northwest corner of the Morningside campus and will complete the rectangle that was envisioned by Columbia’s master planners 113 years ago. The building, recently featured in The New York Times, was designed by architect José Rafael Moneo and is expected to open in 2011.

MILESTONES

Social work professor JANE WALDVOGEL and associate professor NEERAJ KAUSHAL won the 2008 Panum Memorial Prize for the best article published in the journal Social Service Review. The article examines the association between welfare reform and expenditure patterns of poor single/mother families. Separately, Waldvogel was awarded a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University for the 2008-09 academic year, where she will complete a book on Great Britain’s war on poverty.

STEVEN A. SIEGELBAUM, professor of neuroscience and pharmacology, has been named chair of the Department of Neuroscience. Siegelbaum became a faculty member of the College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1981 and has served as vice chair of the department since its formation in July 2007.

ROBERT E. FULLILOWE, associate dean of community and minority affairs and professor of clinical sociomedical sciences at Mailman School of Public Health, received the Commissioner’s Distinguished Service Award from the New York State Department of Health for outstanding contributions in HIV/AIDS. Fullilove was recognized for his work through the Faith Communities project, where he has increased awareness of HIV/AIDS among communities of African and Latino descent.

GRANTS & GIFTS

WHO GAVE IT: Robert Berne (CC’60, BUS’62)
WHAT FOR: “Tribute Endowment”
HOW MUCH: $1 million
WHO GOT IT: College of Physicians and Surgeons
WHAT FOR: “Legacy Challenge Fund”
HOW WILL IT BE USED: To support and enhance financial aid

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WHO GAVE IT: Estates of Richard (CC’35) and Mabel Tunstead
WHAT FOR: “Endowment for faculty and financial aid”
HOW MUCH: $5 million
WHO GOT IT: Arts and Sciences, Columbia College
WHAT FOR: “Endowment for faculty and financial aid”
HOW WILL IT BE USED: Two-thirds of this bequest will support two professorships in the Arts and Sciences. The remaining $1.67 million will honor the Class of 1933 by supporting students at the College and SEAS.

WHO GAVE IT: National Science Foundation
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HOW WILL IT BE USED: To support Parkinson’s Disease research.

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WHAT FOR: “Legacy Challenge Fund”
HOW WILL IT BE USED: This new initiative designated for scholarships provides one matching dollar for every three committed through a planned gift to create a named scholarship in honor of the donor.

ON CAMPUS

From Low to Highest Post

Dear Alma, How did Dwight D. Eisenhower get from Low Library to the White House?—Columbia History Buff

Dear Columbia,

Eisenhower is remembered for many accomplishments—the nation’s 34th president, a five-star general and Supreme Allied Commander during World War II, and the first commander of NATO. Yet he will not be remembered as one of Columbia’s great presidents. For all his success in leading a fractious alliance of nations during wartime, it was clear Eisenhower was not much interested in the responsibilities of a university president. According to several Eisenhower biographers, the former general made it clear during his negotiations for the post with Thomas Watson, chair of IBM and Columbia’s board of trustees, that he wanted no part in fundraising and didn’t want to participate in faculty meetings.

Nevertheless, Columbia’s board—impressed by boosting the University’s reputation by hosting one of the most famous and respected men in the world before he became U.S. President—offered Eisenhower the job of Columbia’s 15th president at a salary of $25,000 a year. He started in June 1948.

One of Eisenhower’s first accomplishments was to keep Columbia’s legendary football coach, Lou Little, from being lured away by Yale. Little later said of Eisenhower, “He nailed me in one interview, and without a raise in salary, he had that rare gift from God of making you feel appreciated, valuable—yes, inspired somehow.”

Alas, the Columbia faculty and students didn’t share that view. Eisenhower had few dealings with professors, who were suspicious of anyone in his position without an academic pedigree or advanced degree. (Eisenhower was a West Point graduate.) Of his nine semesters here, he was off campus for substantial parts of seven semesters. During the academic year of 1949 through 1950, the only year when Eisenhower was consistently on campus, the Columbia Spectator began running regular stories on his “absentee presidency.” In late 1950, President Harry S. Truman asked Eisenhower to become the first commander of the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Eisenhower spent the next 18 months organizing NATO, and when he finished, he ran for the Republican nomination for president. He resigned from Columbia in January 1953, just before his inauguration.

Writes Robert A. McCaughey, a Columbia events, performances, seminars and lectures, please go to http://columbiasor.columbia.edu

ASK ALMA’S OWL

Eisenhower on Low Library steps, moving to crowd

Send your questions for Alma’s Owl to carecon@columbia.edu

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Barack Obama wasn’t the only Columbian whose achievements were celebrated on Inauguration Day. The celebration of the presidential events also featured the work of a Columbian whom few people have heard of: Cyrus Moussavi, a Columbia College senior whose service work in Kenya was featured on an MTV special, Be the Change: Live from the Inauguration on inauguration night.

In addition to Moussavi, the ball highlighted youth service activities in New York and Washington, D.C., as part of its support of Obama’s call to all Americans to commit to public service.

Moussavi caught the attention of MTV producers because of his work in communities in rural Kenya, where he most recently helped build a computer lab in a local school. An engineering and philosophy double major from Cedar Falls, Iowa, he has for the past year been working with Millennium Villages, which fights poverty in Africa at the local level by improving education, health, gender equality and environmental sustainability. Millennium Villages is led, in part, by the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

MTV anchored its televised special—in partnership with ServiceNation—from the president’s official Youth Inaugural Ball in D.C. ServiceNation is an organization that supports expanding national service programs such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps. Last September, ServiceNation brought together the two main presidential candidates, then Sen. Obama and Sen. John McCain, for a nationally televised discussion of civic engagement. The MTV special featuring Moussavi will include live remarks from the newly sworn-in president.

“Millennium Villages is a project—much like Obama’s campaign—that depends a lot on individual donations,” Moussavi said. “Small donations from young people and volunteering for what he called ‘small-scale work’ can lead to large-scale change. ‘This is a thing young people can be involved with, even if it’s just donating bed nets to prevent malaria.’”

Each winter and service-learning experiences are widespread at Columbia, where thousands of undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty and staff, participate in a wide array of academic research, civic partnership and social entrepreneurship efforts—from local neighborhoods in New York City to developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Moussavi first learned about the Millennium Villages project when he sat in on a talk about global poverty by Jeffrey Sachs, Columbia professor and director of the University’s Earth Institute, who he says “moved and impressed” him. “What seemed an insurmountable obstacle—devastating poverty in Africa—was suddenly broken down into a series of smaller challenges that even a random college kid could help with,” said Moussavi.

Moussavi sent an email to Sachs the next day and immediately returned to Columbia to start his last semester and would miss the celebrations surely to take place throughout Kenya. “They’re going to have the craziest party in the world here,” he said.

Letter Urges More Funds for Science in Obama Stimulus Plan

A group of 49 Nobel laureates and other scientific leaders, including six Columbia professors, sent a letter to President Barack Obama just before his inauguration, urging an increase in funding for scientific research and innovation as part of his economic stimulus package. This letter has been endorsed by 49 university presidents, including Columbia President Lee C. Bollinger.

Led by Nobel laureate Eric Kandel, University Professor of Physiology and Psychiatry at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, and David Gross, a Nobel winner at Stanford University, the signatories state that the stimulus package presents an opportunity to begin the real project of restoring science in the nation, because the spending on science will itself create new opportunities for Americans.

At a Jan. 8 speech at George Mason University about his plan to revitalize the economy, Obama called for increased spending “in the science, research and technology that will lead to new medical breakthroughs, new discoveries and entire new industries,” including the creation of a “clean-energy economy.”

The letter writers believe Congress and the president must not move incrementally. They note that increased scientific funding will create jobs across the economy, revitalize America’s scientific infrastructure and provide the groundwork for national leadership in science.

“While some might argue that the current economic crisis should push such plans into the future,” the letter reads, “we believe, to the contrary, that the stimulus package provides a vital opportunity to begin rebuilding American science for both short-term needs, such as infrastructure spending, as well as long-term initiatives in basic science research.

Similar appeals by many other academic and scientific leaders have been made. On Dec. 15, 2008, national leaders in politics, business, research and education, including Princeton University President Shirley M. Tilghman, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and U.S. Rep. Rush Holt, (D-N.J.) also called for renewing America’s commitment to science and technology. The Association of American Universities and the American Association for the Advancement of Science are closely monitoring Obama’s call for increased investment in science and have been sharing updates on the issue with their members.

Bollinger, in furtherance of the letter of request, said, “It is our belief that such an investment is not only critical to the long-term health of our economy, it will ensure that America remains at the forefront of scientific research.”
**Medical Research Can Deliver Economic Boost**

By Lee Goldman

I magine an economic stimulus that could increase jobs, help the domestic economy and strengthen our global competitiveness, while also reducing disease and improving health. Before you say it sounds too good to be true, repeat after me: National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The NIH supports groundbreaking research with tremendous economic benefits. It has created a generation of new jobs and products, and developed preventive, therapeutic and diagnostic measures that improve Americans’ health and overall quality of life.

Biomedical research is a significant economic driver.

According to nonpartisan analyses, the NIH gives $23 billion to support research work at universities and institutions. This funding in all 50 states immediately generates more than $50 billion in new business, including more than $18 billion in wages.

Research funding creates skilled jobs, new products and improved technologies. More than 4,000 new technologies were brought to market by nearly 200 universities, hospitals and research institutions between 1998 and 2006, according to Congressional testimony by former NIH director Elias Zerhouni. And from 1980 to 2006, nearly 6,000 new companies were formed around technologies developed by these research institutions, which is up from direct funding alone.

At $2 trillion a year, health care spending in the United States is more than 16 percent of the gross domestic product. The NIH budget for outside research (as opposed to what it does in its own laboratories) represents about 1 percent of national health care expenditures. Yet the payroll for consumers in health care has been enormous: In the past 30 years, age-adjusted stroke deaths have fallen 70 percent; age-adjusted heart disease deaths dropped 60 percent; AIDS deaths since 1995 have been reduced by 70 percent; and vaccines have virtually eliminated numerous diseases.

Despite this undeniable success story, NIH funding has not kept pace with inflation since 2004, and the basic demographics of aging baby boomers and the emerging obesity epidemic could negate decades of progress. The current NIH budget represents a loss of more than $3.6 billion in purchasing power since 2003. Even the heralded “doubling” of the NIH budget between 1998 and 2003 was followed by years of stagnation, so the NIH budget has actually grown more slowly since 1998 than in the prior 30 years.

The NIH has been very nimble as it redirects its focus from a “late stage, smart spot light” to what it does in its own laboratories represents a lot of room for improvement one.” As chronic disease—much of it preventable—consumes the largest portion of U.S. health care dollars, we must also improve preventive services to reduce medical costs and save patients even more money over the long term.

At a minimum, a robust, high levels and that are possible that are implied in federal policy making and the competing interests at play. They also understand how policies run at state and local levels, both for people with health concerns and for administration agencies.

An ambitious HIV policy agenda with a strengthened National Institutes of Health will have important ramifications for the School of Social Work. Many of our faculty are research leaders in child development, at-risk youth, family functioning, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, aging, alcohol and substance abuse, juvenile justice, health disparities and more. We are excited that science will once again be valued for its transformative potential.

We are pleased to be providing the Office of Management and Budget with our expertise. We are proud Vice President Joseph Biden has named our alumnus Jared Bernstein as his chief economic adviser.

Because we prepare professionals to engage in social policy formulation, the design of systems of care, social enterprise administration, the provision of prevention and health promotion, primary care, to acute care, and shortchanges the other crucial points on the continuum of high-quality care, from prevention and health promotion, to primary care, to acute care, and responsible for shaping and strengthening our future. Thus, he and his team have begun to reach out to the American people to engage them as partners in the work that must occur in every community and at all levels of government to put the nation on a promising path to a better future.

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Health care reform

By Nicholas Lemann

In the minds of journalists of a certain age are lodged hazy golden memories of a time when what we used to call “the press” (and we now call “the mainstream media”) was the only way the public had of finding out what presidents were up to. This meant that there was a buffer institution—“the mainstream media”—between presidents and the public. There was a vast and varied cacophony of voices emanating from political parties, campaigns and interest groups. The new president clearly understands the importance of the issue of the environment, the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling the crisis of global warming. He has appointed a team that has already begun to make progress on the urgent agenda item—but there are other critical issues.

The new administration is one of the crises confronting the economy and imperils the long-term sustainability of the planet. If we solve that problem, we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and redesign economic growth. The new president clearly understands the importance of the issue of the environment, the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling the crisis of global warming. He has appointed a team that has already begun to make progress on the urgent agenda item—but there are other critical issues.
Do you think too much has been made of the comparison to Lincoln’s “team of rivals” cabinet? Doris Kearns Goodwin’s Team of Rivals makes a reasonably simple point, even though the book is very rich and complex. It’s essentially a variant of the old phrase: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I don’t consider any of Obama’s appointees enemies, and — with one exception — even rivals. But I do think the analogy is useful, and I also suspect that the book had some influence on his appointments. Bringing strong and powerful people into government — but not in the public strategy — is a roadmap for fixing our grim financial system, he actually worked.

Every presidential administration has its own style, or personality. From what you’ve seen so far of the presidential transition, can you characterize how the Obama administration will be run? It’s very hard to predict what the personality of an administration will be before it starts governing. Although Obama has chosen many experienced people, they have never worked together before, and it will probably be some time until a chemistry is visible. The Obama campaign was a very tightly run and highly disciplined operation, but running the government will not be as easy to control.

FDI had several honeymoon years when he could get virtually anything through Congress and when he had tremendous support from the electorate. The world moves faster now, does Obama get that kind of honeymoon? Franklin Roosevelt did indeed have enormous power to get things done in his first years as president, and for many of the same reasons that may make Obama a very powerful president, at least for a time. Crises, and the fear they create, tend to make people look to their leaders for help, and leaders who appear to have answers are likely to get a great deal of support in return. Times have changed since the 1930s, and the political world is much more fragmented and partisan than it once was. I’m sure Obama’s presidency will differ markedly from Roosevelt’s in many ways, but I do think he will have some kind of honeymoon for at least a while. He’ll need it, because there is a lot he will have to do very quickly.

The last two years have engendered a lack of faith in all our institutions — government, Wall Street, etc. Does the age of Obama, if you will, make it possible to restore the honeymoon? No one person is likely to restore faith in government. The disillusionment with government has been underway for almost 40 years, and it will take more than a few months of a new presidency to end that disillusionment. But if Obama is able to sustain the sense of trust and hope that he created in his campaign, he can certainly make a contribution to shifting the way people view politics.

Could Obama’s election signal a demographic shift away from the Reagan-era Republican coalition of middle-class voters joining social and economic conservatives that dominated national elections for generations? Or could all this look very different in two or four years? I think the failures of the Bush administration have given the Democrats an enormous opportunity to shift the political balance. They now have a president elected by the largest margin of any Democrat in the last 30 years, and the largest Democratic margin in Congress since the 1960s. The economic crisis has opened an opportunity to challenge the age of the unfettered free market and has caused many people to reconsider the value of government, and of regulation. So it’s possible that this election will mark a long-term shift in the political climate, as other elections — 1998, 2002, 2006 — have done. All depends on how successful the Obama presidency is.

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The last few years also have engendered a lack of faith in all our institutions — government, Wall Street, etc.

Do you think too much has been made of the comparison to Lincoln’s “team of rivals” cabinet? Doris Kearns Goodwin’s Team of Rivals makes a reasonably simple point, even though the book is very rich and complex. It’s essentially a variant of the old phrase: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I don’t consider any of Obama’s appointees enemies, and — with one exception — even rivals. But I do think the analogy is useful, and I also suspect that the book had some influence on his appointments. Bringing strong and powerful people into government — but not in the public strategy — is a roadmap for fixing our grim financial system, he actually worked.

Every presidential administration has its own style, or personality. From what you’ve seen so far of the presidential transition, can you characterize how the Obama administration will be run? It’s very hard to predict what the personality of an administration will be before it starts governing. Although Obama has chosen many experienced people, they have never worked together before, and it will probably be some time until a chemistry is visible. The Obama campaign was a very tightly run and highly disciplined operation, but running the government will not be as easy to control.

FDI had several honeymoon years when he could get virtually anything through Congress and when he had tremendous support from the electorate. The world moves faster now, does Obama get that kind of honeymoon? Franklin Roosevelt did indeed have enormous power to get things done in his first years as president, and for many of the same reasons that may make Obama a very powerful president, at least for a time. Crises, and the fear they create, tend to make people look to their leaders for help, and leaders who appear to have answers are likely to get a great deal of support in return. Times have changed since the 1930s, and the political world is much more fragmented and partisan than it once was. I’m sure Obama’s presidency will differ markedly from Roosevelt’s in many ways, but I do think he will have some kind of honeymoon for at least a while. He’ll need it, because there is a lot he will have to do very quickly.
Xi Chen
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Born in Suzhou, China, Chen learned English while in high school, at the age of nine. At 13, as a freshman at Xi'an Jiaotong University in Shaanxi, he felt pressured to major in mechanics by the department chair. Despite an abundance of mechanics students, the subject was taught in a lifeless manner, he said, with no real-world examples.

But Chen stuck it out and got his master’s at 21 from Tsinghua University in Beijing, then went to Harvard University for his Ph.D. It was there, while a research assistant, that Chen began to see the vast possibilities in engineering mechanics, for which he credits his former thesis adviser, Professor John Hutchinson. “He used wide examples to make me see why mechanics is interesting,” Chen said, completely changed my view of mechanics.”

Encouraging Chen to talk to professors in the physics, chemistry and even anthropology departments, Hutchinson trained him to apply the basics principles of mechanics to alternative areas. “It was obvious from the start of his studies at Harvard that Xi had the prior training, the motivation and the ability to stand out as a researcher,” said Hutchinson, professor of engineering and applied mechanics. “I’m honored that he credits me with broadening his perspectives and interests. I think that can primarily be chalked up to the fact that mechanics has a key role to play in a vast range of engineering problems and physical phenomena.”

Now Chen tries to instill that same drive and enthusiasm in his own students. This summer, he will teach a younger audience how to think unconventionally in an engineering program offered to Harlem high school students through Columbia’s Double Discovery Center.

Chen, mindful of his own experience, knows that students can stay away from science. “They can be intimidated by the lab with its fancy equipment and by looking at the detailed equations on the board,” said Chen. “I’m trying to explain science using very simple principles. I hope this motivates and encourages some of them to pursue science and engineering as a career.”

COLUMBIA PEOPLE

Rebecca Rodriguez

WHO SHE IS: Senior Associate Director of Entrepreneurship Center for Technology Innovation and Community Engagement (CTICE)

YEARS AT COLUMBIA: Seven

WHAT SHE DOES: Rodriguez’s job at CTICE’s Engaged Entrepreneurship Program is only slightly newer than the program itself, which was formed last May to promote the entrepreneurial efforts of Columbia students, faculty, staff and alumni. Part of her job focuses on networking. To that end, Rodriguez, an entrepreneur herself, organizes events where budding business owners can connect with people who might provide services and advice to help them get started. She works with a number of student entrepreneur groups, such as Columbia Organization of Rising Entrepreneurs and the Society for Entrepreneurship, Technology and Innovation.

On Feb. 4, CTICE will host its first-ever Pitch Fest, a networking event open to all Columbia students who want to share and brainstorm on new business ideas. Other events planned for the spring include one in which entrepreneurs will present their business proposals before an audience and receive instant feedback from a panel of experts. Another will include a competition for funding. “A big part about entrepreneurship,” she said, “is feeding off of people’s energies, their ideas and creativity. Pitch Fest, I hope, will be that for everyone.”

BEST PART OF THE JOB: “I enjoy creating,” said Rodriguez. “This position was newly created one, and defining its scope, expanding its parameters and bringing more depth to it are things I enjoy.”

Professors Back Bold Plan for Mortgage Relief

By Melanie A. Farmer

Professors from Columbia’s business and law schools have proposed a way to stem foreclosures by modifying the terms on privately securitized mortgages, the instruments at the core of the housing crisis.

Research shows that when these mortgages become delinquent, servicers of securitized mortgages opt for foreclosure over mortgage modification much more often than private lenders who service their own mortgages. The professors’ plan calls for making legislative changes that make it more attractive to lenders to modify mortgages.

The plan is co-written by business professors Christopher Mayer and Thomas Pikovsky as well as Edward McDermott, a law professor. In testimony at a Jan. 15 hearing before the House Committee on Financial Services, Mayer called the proposal “a temporary program to moderate an avalanche of foreclosures during an economic crisis. It is more tailored and potentially less burdensome on investors than temporary legislation enacted during the Great Depression and upheld by the Supreme Court.”

He added that it could prevent more than a million foreclosures, at a “modest cost to taxpayers of $107 billion.”

Specifically, the proposal calls for legislation that would be in effect for only three years and would eliminate the legal barriers to modifying securitized loans. It also would create a “safe harbor” from litigation for good faith modifications.

Mayer is the Paul Milstein Professor of Real Estate and senior vice dean at the business school. He has studied credit and housing markets for 16 years, when he was at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and while on the faculty of several business schools before coming to Columbia. In his testimony, he called the housing market’s problems “stunning and unprecedented,” and likely to get worse without prompt action.

Along with Columbia Business School Dean R. Glenn Hubbard, Mayer has also proposed a separate plan that would allow new mortgages to be issued at a rate that is 1.6% higher than the 10-year treasury bond. Such a move, he said, would immediately lower mortgage rates for conforming mortgages, help stabilize housing prices and provide a strong fiscal stimulus.
Thousands of people gathered on the steps of Low Library Jan. 20 to witness the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama (CC’83), the 44th president of the United States, and the first alumnus to take on the nation’s highest office, making the occasion a special event for Columbians. It was the first day of classes in the new semester, and despite frosty temperatures, the bundled-up spectators were in high spirits, waving Columbia blue and white pom-poms or marking the historic moment with their favorite Obama tee.

Viewers, including Columbia President Lee C. Bollinger, with his wife, Jean Magnano Bollinger (top right), watched the inauguration ceremony live from a Jumbotron on Low Plaza.

A substantial number of local and national media came to campus to cover what appeared to be one of the largest such events outside of the millions who stood for miles in Washington. Here on campus, where it was the first day of the new semester, some professors let classes out early so students could watch the inaugural event on the large screen. At one graduate school, professors took a break from a faculty meeting to do so, too. The president’s office provided free cocoa and cider on the plaza, and students at tables laden with Columbia-blue themed clothing peddled their wares.

At the School of Social Work, Professor Fred Ssewamala watched with his students because, he said, “I wanted to share the historical moment; I couldn’t watch this alone.”

Standing in Low Plaza, 20-year-old Olga Figueroa thought back to the moment in kindergarten when she told her class she wanted to be president one day. “Everyone in my class laughed, but my teacher encouraged me and said I could be anything,” said Figueroa, a junior in political science attending Columbia as part of an exchange program with Howard University. Until today, Figueroa, who is Hispanic, said it didn’t seem realistic. “Now I feel like there are endless opportunities,” she added. Figueroa is doing her honors thesis on Obama’s campaign.

The fourth graders from the School at Columbia cheered the loudest and waved their blue-and-white shakers when Obama’s daughters, 10-year-old Malia and 7-year-old Sasha, were introduced. But the ovation from the rest of the crowd swelled the first time Obama appeared on the television screen, before he even was on the podium, and was louder still in the moments after he took the oath of office.

Mary Ghadimi, a sophomore majoring in East Asian studies, came out to Low to view the inauguration with her brother who is also a Columbia College student. “I wanted to share this with the campus because this is our first African American president and the first time I’m here [in the U.S.] during a presidential inauguration,” said the Japanese-born Ghadimi. “This is an important, historic moment...I think it’s fitting that the first African American president comes from Columbia.”

Sandra Masur (GSAS’67), who is part of a multigenerational family of Columbia graduates said, “It’s just great to be here to celebrate it on this campus” Her daughter graduated from Barnard and her son from the College.

Some students, however, are worried for Obama. “He has a lot of expectations, more than any president ever,” said Robert Sintersteen, (GS’11). “It’s good that everyone’s hopeful, it’s just I’m worried that people will turn on him quick. You have to be patient for those changes to happen, and some people aren’t patient.”

During his remarks to the crowd, Bollinger invited all Columbia students back to his house on Morningside Drive for refreshments after the inauguration concluded. A stream of about 200 took him up on the offer.