

The Tricentennial Project
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Introduction

The climate crisis is not only a physical phenomenon, but a reflection of the ideas, values, and social relations that produced it. The crisis also magnifies existing power imbalances; for example, younger generations are the most at risk from climate change, but possess the least institutional power to address it. Addressing the climate crisis at the scale of the problem will require not only rethinking our relationship to nature, but to one another, and will affect all academic disciplines, not only those like sustainable development or earth sciences. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, while a crisis, is an instructive example in how global crises magnify existing inequalities. In demonstrating that rapid, large-scale societal shifts are possible, it also offers an opportunity, as we seek to return to normal, to envision what “normal” looks like.

The specificity of the problem—that young people lack institutional power to address climate change, and that climate change will require creative action across all aspects of life—creates a gap that the Tricentennial Project begins to address. In 1954, 200 years after Columbia College’s inception, the university still did not admit women. Now, we are responsible for remedying another injustice: responding to the climate crisis as humanity’s greatest threat at all levels of the university, to ensure its survival beyond the tricentennial, in 2054.

By empowering young people from all corners of the university, we hope this project opens a reciprocal line of communication between undergraduate students, and faculty of the Earth Institute and new Climate School. Moreover, we hope it provides a way for people of all backgrounds, beginning from a desire for mutual understanding, to discover shared warrants and conceptualize and work toward climate action. By gathering as colleagues, we dissolve the hierarchies of student and professor, undergraduate and graduate, activist and administration.

We are in a new era of human history, and untangling the problems climate change has created will extend generations into the future. In doing so, we view the climate crisis as an opportunity for envisioning the university to incorporate the voices and vision of young people, who will work to solve climate change in the decades to come.

What This Will Look Like

The first practical manifestation of the Tricentennial Project is the creation of an undergraduate student group that will discuss, brainstorm, and collaborate with faculty to expand the university’s vision of climate action, based on the priorities of young people. Doing so addresses a statement included in the recent climate Task Force report:

The design process, like the Task Force and engagement process around it, will continue to be broadly participatory, bringing in faculty, scientists, students, and staff from around the University. It will remain transparent and open to the community at large.

Currently, apart from two student town halls, undergraduate involvement in the Climate School, and the university's climate action in general, has been minimal. Crucially, there is no formal infrastructure in place to incorporate students' voices—and, therefore, no guarantee that young people will be heard. Creating a commonplace for students and faculty to converse on climate change will ensure that young people are empowered to help control their own futures.

To that aim, we propose a series of Zoom discussions to foster conversation, first between students to share and develop ideas, then between students and faculty to forge personal relationships as colleagues and co-creators. In the discussions, students will learn from faculty members, and vice versa, as students share their own thoughts, fears, and priorities that the university may or may not currently address in their climate activities, whether in plans for the new Climate School, ongoing research at the Earth Institute, within the undergraduate curriculum, or other areas.

In the past, the JED Live Well Learn Well Initiative incorporated student input on mental health by creating mixed student-faculty groups. Students applied to join and were selected by administrators for participation. However, the Tricentennial Project challenges both the formality and hierarchy of that top-down model. Forging individual, reciprocal relationships between students and faculty will allow them to come together as colleagues and co-collaborators.

The aim of the Zoom lunches is to reflect student input; therefore, their specific content remains undefined. Initial meetings between undergraduate members will focus on defining areas of students' interest and connecting this with current climate activity at the university. As a product of these discussions, meetings with faculty will likely reflect a larger theme in which students and faculty can explore specific questions. Possible topics of concern should reflect the far-reaching, interdisciplinary nature of climate change, and be of crucial importance to involved members. Questions might look something like this:

Columbia and the Core: *The climate crisis is a crisis of ideas as much as resources. In Contemporary Civilization, for example, we are taught philosopher John Locke's perspective that nature is a reserve of capital waiting for humans to subjugate and exploit; he calls nature uncultivated for human benefit a "waste." What aspects of the Earth Institute or Climate School might address this? How does this interact with your discipline? How do our attitudes surrounding nature affect how we think of solutions to climate change?*

Or:

Climate and Undergraduates: The Earth Institute does extensive, foundational work on climate change, but is quite siloed from the undergraduate community—even the Climate Task Force Report admits to this. Along with affecting young people the most, climate anxiety substantially damages students’ mental health, and often remains an unspoken fear among students. How can the Earth Institute or Climate School bridge this academic and conversational bridge between faculty and undergraduates?

These examples are just two possibilities for discussion that reflect my own perspective; group members are encouraged, and expected, to think of their own. Depending on the outcome of the Zoom lunches, the student group could focus on both finite and ongoing projects. Possibilities include a climate conference or expert panel, co-led by group members, an online journal, art or essay-writing contests, or whatever results from the discussions.

Main Deliverables

- A sustained, reciprocal connection between undergraduate students and faculty at the Earth Institute and Climate School, fostering open discussion on current climate efforts and possible directions for the future. Effort will be directed at establishing and maintaining authentic relationships between faculty and young people.
- A website or journal with reflection from students and faculty
- Potential generation of a sustained student group that hosts guest speakers from the climate school, creates an undergraduate climate humanities journal, etc.

Additional Deliverables

- Website with several features: a page summing up these discussions/reflections, a page with a conversation platform for students to share their ideas, opinions, questions for faculty and administrators, a page for students to post their own problem-solving projects to recruit other students and interested parties
- Social media distribution of videos and photos from these discussions
- Encourage students to publish op-eds about their reflections
- Database/website where Columbia students can post projects they’re working on/problems they think need to be solved, to provide a place for students to see what other students are working on, and for students to outsource/look for collaborators

Earth Institute Collaboration, Proposed Timeline, and COVID-19

- Currently, we have established a connection in Alex Halliday’s office, the director of the Earth Institute, and are developing plans to collaborate with EI on the project. While still in preliminary stages, this collaboration would likely involve EI and RCSS co-hosting Tricentennial events, better access to EI faculty, and more promotion of the project.

- Recruiting for Tricentennial began in late May and ended June 26th, after which we have begun reaching out to potential members to schedule group meetings. After communicating with the EI office, Tricentennial will likely hold initial meetings this summer to define students' interest in the club, their preferred topics of discussion, and begin identifying interested and interesting faculty members, before hosting the discussion series in Fall 2020.
- These initial plans were formed with full awareness of the unpredictability of COVID-19, and Tricentennial's informal, discussion-based nature, if necessary, pairs relatively well with an online format.

Budget

- Note -- these requests are speculative and largely subject to change based on collaboration with the Earth Institute, and level of on-campus activity we are able to achieve

\$375	Group meal for Tricentennial after completion of the discussion series, to reflect on findings (estimated ~\$25/15 attendees)
\$150	Funding for promotional fliers, water, etc. for a Tricentennial speaker panel or event to discuss findings of the group meetings