

## **Athena Center Report: Executive Summary**

The retirement of the Athena Center's Founding Director, Kathryn Kolbert, and the upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Center, presented Barnard's leadership with a unique opportunity to solicit thoughts and feedback from on the Center's programs and impact to help inform next steps and plans for the future.

At the request of Barnard President Sian Beilock and Provost Linda Bell, Giorgio DiMauro, Dean for International and Global Strategy, Victoria Gordon, Acting Director of the Athena Center, and Lisa Tiersten, Professor of History, prepared a report on the Athena Center. Over the course of nearly four months, they reached out to students, faculty, alumnae, and administrators to attend listening sessions about Athena. In total, they hosted approximately 75 meetings with more than 225 participants. Using a standardized questionnaire, they solicited feedback on the impact, strengths, and weaknesses of Athena's student-facing programs, and that data was aggregated into a final report. The main themes and key takeaways have been distilled into this executive summary.

### **Students**

- Many of the students interviewed mentioned that Athena was an important factor in their decision to come to Barnard. They see it as epitomizing the College's mission to educate and equip women to lead. They believe that Athena enriches their traditional liberal arts education and expands the range of what they can do after graduation.
- Students value the program's combination of academic and co-curricular components and see these as mutually reinforcing and enriching. They mention the opportunity to combine intellectual and professional development and the chance to put theory into practice through, for example, leadership labs, internships, field trips, and the project-based senior seminar. Many appreciate that Athena offers them a chance to engage with subject matter and develop skills they might not otherwise encounter and to meet with women leaders from all walks of life.
- A number of students mention that the Senior Seminar timeline and structure are problematic. Some report that there is not enough time to meaningfully complete the project, while others note that it conflicts with senior thesis requirements in their majors. Suggestions for addressing these issues include adding a mentorship component, having students work in groups, and/or extending the timeline to two semesters.
- Students say Athena fosters a sense of community and creates opportunities for meaningful peer connection across disciplines. They appreciate that it is just for Barnard students, that it compensates for a lack of campus community, and that it allows students to develop relationships outside of their major.
- Students report that Athena is unique in providing access to a number of resources not found elsewhere on campus. These include leadership labs, the Athena Digital Design Agency, connections to internships and fellowships, funding for conference attendance, and mentoring relationships with staff. The leadership labs in particular are widely appreciated.

- Students note that Athena provides professional development opportunities and skill-building, preparing students for life after Barnard and connecting them to a valuable network. They value the opportunity to develop skills such as negotiation, public speaking, entrepreneurship, and financial fluency. More generally, Athena boosts students' confidence and allows them to discover their entrepreneurial side. In one student's words "I can write organic chemistry formulas, but I can't prepare my own taxes. Athena made me feel more prepared and competent."
- Many students value the open-access nature of the program but note that it has contributed to the following issues: (1) resources are stretched too thin, resulting in larger class sizes and less opportunity for engagement (student <> student, student <> staff, student <> alumnae, staff <> alumnae), and (2) student commitment levels vary, which can hinder the creation of intellectual and social community.
- STEM students report that Athena exposes them to ideas and subject matter outside of their disciplines, but that there is a barrier to entry for these students because Scholar requirements often do not connect with their major requirements.
- Perceived impact of the classes varies widely by major, instructor, and cohort.
- Perceptions of what Athena is/does range widely, but students agree that Athena's definition of leadership needs to be clearly articulated and expressed to the community. Many stress that the Center must take and project an expansive view of leadership. Some students criticize the orientation of Athena, which they see as too corporate, too focused on entrepreneurship, and insufficiently focused on social justice. Others also note the need for more staff interaction and oversight.

## Faculty

- Faculty presented many constructive ideas for how to improve the Athena Center and had a variety of suggestions for paths forward. With a couple of exceptions, humanities and social science departments were more critical of the Center and STEM departments less so.
- Many faculty note that Athena students value the program and feel it's an important part of their experience, one that broadens their professional horizons and empowers them.
- Almost all faculty agree that Athena provides important pre-professional development opportunities and training for the workplace and, more broadly, for life after Barnard. In particular, there is widespread faculty support for the Athena Digital Design Agency, the Leadership Labs, the fellowships, and mentorship and networking opportunities.
- Many faculty appreciate the hands-on, skills-based learning opportunities provided by Athena, which they see as offering a valuable complement to the traditional liberal arts approach to learning. They note that Athena enables students to develop their capacities in multifaceted ways.

- A few faculty believe that Athena epitomizes Barnard's mission and represents the future of the liberal arts in its combination of academic and practical elements. They note in particular that Athena deepens the internship experience by combining work with structured reflection and analysis.
- Some faculty see Athena as an important recruiting tool for Barnard and a boon to its public image; a substantial number value that Athena fosters alumnae community and connection to Barnard.
- A number of faculty highlight that the Athena Scholars program is diverse in composition and, in particular, that it provides valuable resources to first-generation and less-advantaged students.
- A significant number of faculty believe that Athena competes with BCRW for resources, students, and identity; a few faculty note Athena's early efforts to avoid this. A handful regard Athena as serving distinctly different needs than BCRW and suggest that a women's college should have space for multiple women's centers.
- Most faculty say that Athena's identity and mission need sharper definition. Almost everyone agrees that the program and mission need to be better communicated across the community.
- Many faculty see Athena as conflicting with the liberal arts model and mission. A majority of those interviewed consider its current focus to be too corporate, while others emphasize what they see as an uncritical perspective on leadership. A number of faculty question the validity of in any way promoting leadership at a liberal arts college, but some would like to see Athena expand the definition of leadership and broaden its mandate (for example, by working with student government or engaging with sustainability initiatives). A substantial number of faculty are not opposed to some of Athena's programs but believe that the Center should be rebranded or repackaged. These faculty like the idea of preparing women for civic engagement but not "leadership." A number dislike in particular the term "Athena Scholar."
- A core issue for the faculty is whether Athena should offer credit-bearing courses. Many faculty believe that the Center should be exclusively extracurricular and focus on career development; many in this group were particularly critical of the "Women and Leadership" course. Others believe that the Center should retain its academic component but that the courses should be revised and made more critical and rigorous (as well as subject to regular COI approval). There was discussion among the faculty about varying the components; suggestions for restructuring the program include offering one-credit courses, having a rotating group of Barnard faculty teach courses, and/or recruiting scholars of leadership studies in the social sciences (as opposed to business schools).
- Many faculty believe that Athena was not integrated into a vision for the Centers, the curriculum, or the academic mission of the College. Many feel that, as a result, Athena does not adequately engage, consult, or communicate with them. Several faculty, however, point out that Athena partners successfully on events and curricular initiatives with faculty and departments.

- Faculty believe that Athena interferes with students' other coursework and some faculty note the program's inaccessibility for STEM students.

### **Alumnae**

- Athena Scholar alumnae feel they gained a competitive advantage from the program; they were more prepared for professional life than their peers.
- Alumnae consider Athena to be unique in providing access to resources not found elsewhere on campus. These include leadership labs, the Athena Digital Design Agency, connections to internships and Fellowships, funding for conference attendance, and mentoring relationships with staff.
- For many alumnae, Athena was a crucial part of their Barnard experience. They want continued engagement with Athena and plan to donate to Athena. Alumnae who were engaged in multiple ways (i.e., as a Scholar, intern, summer Fellow, Advisory Board member, etc.) feel that connection more deeply.
- Alumnae report that Athena's combination of academic and co-curricular components enhanced their liberal arts experience. It offered them the chance to engage with subject matter and develop skills they might not otherwise have encountered. For most, the academic and practical components reinforced and enriched one another. Many note that the timeline for the Senior Seminar was problematic.
- Many alumnae value the open-access component of the program but note that it contributed to the following issues: (1) resources were stretched too thin, resulting in larger class sizes and less opportunity for engagement (student <> student, student <> staff, student <> alumnae, staff <> alumnae), and (2) student commitment levels varied, which sometimes prevented the creation of intellectual and social community.

### **Administrators (select staff from offices including Finance, General Counsel, Beyond Barnard, Deans, Opportunity Programs, Student Life, Development, Library, and Pre-College Programs)**

- Administrators largely recognize Athena's programs as a benefit to students. The Scholars program, Leadership Labs (in particular, those on financial fluency), Power Talks, summer internships, the Film Festival, and the Athena Digital Design Agency were all noted as examples of the benefit that Athena provides.
- Administrators seek greater connection between Athena and other offices/departments. Many administrators would like to see Athena better integrated into the curriculum.
- Some administrators articulate a need for a clear definition of leadership at Athena and, more broadly, at Barnard.
- Some administrators suggest that Athena needs to clarify its identity and mandate. A number note the current perception of the Center as linked to white corporate feminism.

### **Composite: Ideas for New Leadership**

- Across constituencies, almost everyone agrees that this person should have a combination of higher-education and practical experience.
- Someone who embodies a broad, progressive, intersectional conception of leadership; someone who serves as a role model and advocate for students.
- A collaborator who envisions the Center as a complement to our liberal arts education and wants to work closely with faculty and administrative departments.
- A connector. Someone who can forge a network that brings added value to the college in terms of speakers, donors, professional connections for students, etc. Someone who is dynamic and energetic; an engaging person who can draw people in.
- Students would like to see someone who places an emphasis on student interactions. It should be someone approachable, who can teach one of the courses, and who is interested in developing relationships with students and serving as an advisor.
- Someone who represents the diversity of our student body. Perhaps a non-profit leader, activist, or someone from an international NGO.
- One suggestion was to have two Directors: an academic (possibly from the Barnard faculty) and an administrator.