

2023-2024 ANNUAL REPORT

THE ATHENA CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP

BARNARD

*“You don’t choose the times you live in,
but you do choose who you want to be.
And you do choose how you think.”*

Grace Lee Boggs ’35

Fall 2024

Friends,

I’ve thought a lot about Boggs’ words over the past year, as the director of a center that guides and supports young people growing up in these times. It is an incredible privilege and awesome responsibility we don’t take lightly. How can we create space for them to do the exploration and experimentation they need to do as they figure out what they’ll ultimately choose? That is, after all, what college is all about. How can they do that when it feels like the eyes of the entire world are on them?

In the following pages, you’ll read a bit about what our students spent the year doing – the stories that didn’t make the news but are just as important. You’ll read about the ways they grew into even more creative, collaborative, and courageous changemakers, ever conscious of the opportunities our challenges present and eager to seize those opportunities. I know you’ll marvel, as I do every day, at the generosity and thoughtfulness with which these brilliant students move through the world. I’m beyond proud of each and every one of them.

I’m equally proud of the Athena team and community for how we showed up for these students. Through the annual Athena Film Festival and our SPARK series, as well as virtual and live events, discussions, and field trips, we held space for challenging conversations and hope, disrupting limiting narratives. For the hundreds of students who wanted a truly deep experience with us, we delivered: Our nearly two dozen (!) communities of practice brought together aspiring, emerging, and experienced changemakers to practice leading change in a wide range of ways. In the coming pages, you’ll see why we approach leadership development this way along with how, exactly, our approach works; you’ll also see the many ways in which it’s working through profiles of our students and highlights of our various offerings.

I’m often asked what it’s like to come back to college now, at this age – folks are always curious (and sometimes, I think, a little jealous!) about what a day in the life with today’s Barnard students looks and feels like. This past year, though, I couldn’t help but hear the worry in their voices.

My answer, always, is that it is amazing. It is an amazing honor to work with students who will change the world – who are already changing it, in fact. I’m so grateful to our dedicated staff, my colleagues on campus, and our community for all you did to support these students. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to the Athena Center for Leadership and to the collective pursuit of a better world.

In partnership,



Umbreen Bhatti ’00
Constance Hess Williams ’66 Director
Athena Center for Leadership



The Athena Center for Leadership prepares Barnard students to lead change in this extraordinary moment and throughout their lives.

ABOUT OUR APPROACH

Why prepare our students to lead **change**, specifically?

Put simply, we need it – desperately.

Our approach to leadership development is rooted in the belief that a better world is possible and that the challenges that stand in the way of that world are all connected, as are we. Every one of these challenges presents opportunities to lead positive change – but the change we need won't come from a single person, through a single approach, or in a single try.

Our approach to leadership development is also rooted in our reality.

Today, our students are more racially diverse, more gender-diverse, and more accomplished than ever.

Nearly half are students of color.

Approximately three-quarters held a top leadership position before ever setting foot on campus.

And with a single-digit acceptance rate, Barnard is an institution that serves students who haven't failed at much in their lives – who need and want the learning and transformation in thinking and action that comes from taking risks.

Athena is a center for leadership within a center for leadership – after all, women's colleges are, by definition, centers for leadership – and Barnard has produced remarkable, inspiring leaders for over 130 years.

The leaders we develop here are the leaders we need now.

ABOUT OUR PROGRAMS

Through **SPARK** and our **communities of practice**, we're building a culture of creativity, collaboration, courage, and conscientiousness in all of us, as change agents here at Barnard.

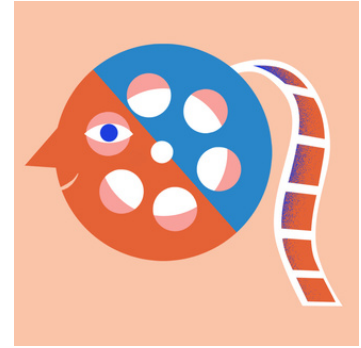
And through the **Athena Film Festival**, we're doing powerful narrative change work – widening the aperture for all of us, at Barnard and beyond, to experience the stories of the many rich, complex, exciting, and impactful ways women lead.



SPARK, our event and experience series, ignites thinking about how change happens and where each of us can begin – or continue.



Our **Communities of Practice** are where aspiring, emerging, and experienced changemakers come together to practice leading change through entrepreneurship, advocacy, policy and government, technology, research and scholarship, film, and more.



The **Athena Film Festival** and the **Athena Creative Development Program** are our own way of leading change, in and through media and entertainment, in partnership with Women and Hollywood.

2023-2024 *at a glance*

10

SPARK events,
with 6 partners:
18 student meals, 4
alum-student dinners, 2
faculty-student lunches,
2 book talks, 1 field trip,
and so much more,
all investigating dialogue
as a tool for
changemaking

661

attendees at
SPARK events, including
students, faculty, staff,
alums, and members of
the community

22

Communities of Practice at
Athena, supported by 6 visiting
experts and experts in
residence:
the Athena Fellows Program,
Athena Advocacy Institute,
Williams Program for Women in
Politics, and our Athena
Incubator, just to name a few....

229

students in Athena
Communities of Practice,
across majors
and class years

79

Athena Film Festival
Community Partners

3,000+

attendees at
the 14th annual
Athena Film
Festival, where
we screened 38
films, including
6 premieres,
and hosted 6
panels and 17
Q&As — all
possible thanks
to the support
of our 28
sponsors and
200 volunteers



“I see dialogue as something that can really only occur between two people who have some type of relationship, who have established trust between themselves.

As Mariame was talking about how spaces can encourage relationships, I found myself thinking about the way that the Athena Center has given me a road map for forming spaces myself and for what I want to see in the spaces I create and the spaces created by the organizations I work with.”

Emily Bach '24

Student interviewer for the 2023 Grace Lee Boggs Lecture, featuring Mariame Kaba

SPARK, our event and experience series, ignites thinking about how change happens and where each of us can begin – or continue.

In late summer 2023, we selected our theme for the 2023–2024 academic year: dialogue.

To guide our exploration of the role of dialogue in changemaking, in September we asked: What does healthy, productive dialogue look like – and what does it require? How can we create spaces for healthy, productive dialogue, starting right here, on our racially diverse, economically diverse, and gender-diverse campus?

Then came October – and with it, new questions. In a charged environment, is dialogue even possible? What can individuals do to make it possible? What can institutions do? How can we build – or rebuild – trust between participants? How should we think about power here?

We hosted public events, as always, to investigate the big questions, but we directed most of our attention to fostering more intimate spaces for personal reflection, group reflection, and practice: lunches with faculty members, a workshop, a field trip, three communities of practice, and a dinner series with alums, as well as a Dialogue Fund to support student-initiated dialogue with peers.

* * *

Thank you to all of our partners in this important work, including Barnard’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Office of Community Engagement and Inclusion, and Center for Engaged Pedagogy; Barnard Center for Research on Women; the Young Alumnae Council at Barnard; Columbia Journalism School; Columbia’s Center for Global Energy Policy; and numerous individual faculty as well as the MacArthur Foundation.

If you're interested in sponsoring or supporting Athena's SPARK series, please email athenacenter@barnard.edu.

2023-2024 SPARKS

Changing the Narrative by Changing the Storyteller

September 2023

Who tells the story matters. This power-packed panel of women newsroom leaders are demonstrating that the people closest to the story should become the storytellers of record. Leveraging local in bold new ways, Cristi Hegrans (Global Press) trains and employs local women journalists in some of the world's least-covered places; Yukari Kane (Prison Journalism Project) is training incarcerated writers to elevate new perspectives on the criminal justice system, and Akoto Ofori-Atta (Capital B) centers Black voices and partners with the communities it serves. Moderated by Lorraine Ali of the LA Times, this dialogue will probe challenging issues of audience, representation and how changing the storyteller can help us all better understand the world & our places in it.

Presented by the MacArthur Foundation in collaboration with the Columbia Journalism School and the Athena Center for Leadership.

We Need More People: On Finding Common Ground In Our Work To Build The World We Want To Inhabit

November 2023

Join us for the second annual Grace Lee Boggs '35 Lecture with Mariame Kaba, longtime organizer, educator, librarian and co-author of *Let This Radicalize You*, followed by a conversation between Mariame Kaba, Barnard student Emily Bach '24, and Athena Center for Leadership Director Umbreen Bhatti '00 about the role of dialogue in driving change.

Presented by Barnard's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the Athena Center for Leadership, Barnard Center for Research on Women, the Office of Community Engagement and Inclusion at Barnard, and Barnard's Young Alumnae Council.

Gather: A Visit to Peoplehood

November 2023

Peoplehood, founded by the same minds behind SoulCycle, is a company whose mission is "to equip people with space, support, and skills to build deeper, more meaningful relationships with others and themselves." We'll head to Peoplehood's flagship NYC location in the Flatiron district, participate in a Gather (to practice our listening skills with the support of an experienced guide), and chat with the team about why they see Peoplehood as a natural successor to SoulCycle and what they've learned since their launch.

Faculty Lunches

October 2023

Dr. Kitzmiller, term assistant professor in education studies, will lead a conversation about how dialogue with educators and youth has been central to building trust with the communities and schools where she engages in practitioner-based advocacy and research to showcase the challenges and possibilities for expanding educational justice in under-resourced urban public schools.

November 2023

Professor Tamara J. Walker, Associate Professor of Africana Studies and author, most recently, of *Beyond The Shores: A History of African Americans Abroad*, invites students interested in all things travel to discuss whether it's possible to be a global citizen in an ethical and sustainable way. What might that look like in the age of travel influencing, pandemics, climate change, and anti-racism? She'll also reflect on her own travel experiences and share insights from her work with her nonprofit The Wandering Scholar, which makes international education opportunities accessible to high schoolers from low-income backgrounds.

Dinner & Dialogue

October 2023 through March 2024

Join Athena for Dinner and Dialogue, a series of delicious dinners and quality conversations about topics that we don't often find ourselves having the right time, space, or conditions to discuss.

(cont.in next column)

Each dinner will take place at the NYC home of an alum and will bring together up to 5 students and 5 alums for a lively, facilitated conversation that we hope will leave you feeling like you have a better understanding of another perspective and like you're part of an amazing community - because you are.

The Power of Stories: A Literary Interpretation and Storytelling Workshop

December 2023

Everyone in the Barnard community has experienced firsthand the impact words can have, especially in the aftermath of violence or in ongoing crises. In this moment of immense loss of life, political strife, and public assembly, many in this community are using their words to effect change. There is no substitute for political protest and the staggering meaning it can make and break on the public stage.

This half-day workshop is not a substitute for political protest or speech, but another outlet for individual and collective sensemaking in profoundly troubling times. The goal is to bring students from a variety of positionalities and political perspectives together to interpret relevant poetry and literature surrounding the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict, to write or tell their own stories (fictional or biographical), and together to read and interpret those stories with as much rigor and respect as published works of literature. We invite students to recommend poetry, short fiction, or excerpts from novels for the group to read at the beginning of the workshop. We seek students who wish to draw on their own creative energies to share something of their experience with others in a space devoted to careful reading, active listening, and self-expression.

Presented by the Center for Engaged Pedagogy and the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and co-sponsored by Athena.

Communities of Practice

Take the Mic, Take Action! (Fall, Spring)
Dialogue & Difference (Fall-Spring)

2023-2024 SPARKS

Dialogue Fund :: Have a Meal On Us

April 2024

"I feel like I can't talk to _____ anymore."

At Athena, we've been hearing some version of the above from multiple Barnard students for a while now, and we want to help.

If you're a Barnard student and you just want to be in dialogue about current events with *one* other person in our campus community (perhaps, to begin to repair a relationship that has frayed since October, or to continue a conversation that you started in a class or a club, or to start a new conversation), we have some funds available for you to have a meal together. We'll help set you up for success (by providing some guiding questions for you both) and ask that you tell us about how it went.



"The Dialogue Fund gave me the time, space, and encouragement to seek out someone I've slightly isolated [from] due to everything. It reminded me to connect with people even as we struggle through things."

SPOTLIGHT :: Dialogue + Difference

At Athena, everything we do is in deep and meaningful collaboration — and our friends at Barnard's Center for Engaged Pedagogy are among our favorite collaborators. Beginning in fall 2023, Alex Pittman, Senior Associate Director of the Center for Engaged Pedagogy, and Danielle-Hope Hayden, then Senior Associate Director of Title IX and Non-Discrimination, co-led a special, timely community of practice for Barnard students in partnership with Athena: Dialogue + Difference.

At a time when calls for "dialogue across difference" seemed ubiquitous, this community of practice served to support students as they incorporated the skills associated with facilitation and mediation into their leadership visions. Over eight meetings, the 12 student participants read scholarship on best facilitation practices, discussed how dialogue could be a tool for bridging experiential and ideological differences, and role-played scenarios that asked them to draw on facilitation and mediation skills in the moment. In reflecting on the experience, Eugenia Baek '24 writes, "Importantly, each technique was contextualized, illustrating not only how but also when to apply it, taking into account unforeseen circumstances. This approach emphasized self-care and respect for others' boundaries within dialogues."

"Looping," which Eugenia describes as, in essence, listening to understand within a group context, was, "despite its simplicity, challenging yet vital ... for enhancing active listening and engagement in sensitive dialogues." In practicing it with peers at the 2024 BOLD Conference, she saw how using this technique could produce a shift in the room, enabling her and the other facilitators to better accommodate and address feedback in the moment — a perfect example of "the effectiveness of our training in real-time application."

The skills Dialogue + Difference students developed will continue to serve them — and, just as importantly, our community as a whole. A few, for example, facilitated conversations during an event for teens at the Athena Film Festival, and six of them have become Learning, Engagement, and Assessment Fellows (LEAFs) in a pedagogical partnership program administered by the Center for Engaged Pedagogy.



Jessica Weis
Facilitator
Take the Mic, Take Action!



“Many times I’ve felt excluded from the conversation and like my opinions don’t matter, despite my knowledge and experience.

In Take the Mic, Take Action! I learned how to take my space. [It] gave me the tools to talk more confidently about what I know.”

Sana Asif Ahmad '24
MPA Program, SIPA
Columbia University

This highlight was adapted from a January 2024 Athena Field Note, available on our website!

SPOTLIGHT :: Take the Mic, Take Action!

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

In fall 2023, Athena partnered with the Women in Energy Initiative at Columbia’s Center for Global Energy Policy (CGEP) to create Take the Mic, Take Action! In this community of practice, changemakers across Columbia University – from Barnard to Columbia College to the School of International and Public Affairs and more – learned practical strategies to facilitate dialogue on all things energy. The group met for two 4-hour sessions focused on public speaking and facilitation, led by Jessica Weis, the Program Director at Women in Energy; now, trained and confident, they can be tapped as moderators for CGEP programs.

* * *

The first thing Daniela Bushiri, a chemical engineering Ph.D. student at SEAS, notices about Take the Mic, Take Action! is that it’s composed of a majority of women. “I haven’t found many women-led spaces at Columbia. I was surprised to find that here, of all places, in a group dedicated to energy policy.” Daniela’s observation represents the energy field at large, where women and nonbinary people make up only a small portion.

This community of practice, however, is committed to uplifting women and nonbinary voices in the sector – and to create environments for inclusion and invite ignored or obscured voices into important conversations.

“Moderating does not mean telling people what you feel, it’s about making sure everyone feels heard,” SIPA graduate Sana Asif Ahmad '24MPA explains, and Claudia Sachs, a JTS/GS dual-degree undergraduate student, agrees. “That’s what I gained from this community of practice – how to be intentional about the ways I include people.”

An added bonus for participants from all the schools: a glimpse into potential future career paths and a support network of individuals who had had similar experiences – a valuable benefit of being part of a community of practice that transcends age and degree programs.

Mira Nayak '27

Lexington, Massachusetts



“I feel a bit better about the world.”

As a high school student, **Mira Nayak '27** ran a club that brought together members of the school community to participate in productive discussions around race, racism, and social justice. She knew she wanted to continue honing the facilitation skills she'd developed through that experience when she got to Barnard, so when she learned in an orientation session that “dialogue” would be the theme of SPARK for the year, she came straight to Athena with some ideas.

“I proposed ideas like a Barbie-themed conversation and other truthfully subpar formats,” laughs Mira. But the lightbulb moment came before long. Over coffee, an alumna from the Class of 1993, curious about how the experiences and perspectives of current Barnard students differed from her own as a student at Barnard in the 1990s, asked Center Director Umbreen Bhatti '00 how students today think about feminism. Umbreen's answer: You should ask them!

* * *

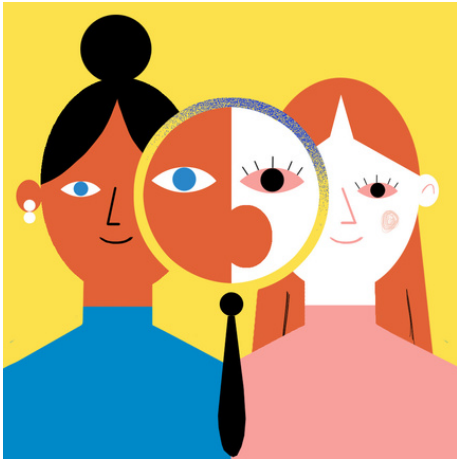
Launched in October 2023, Dinner & Dialogue was a series of delicious dinners and quality conversations about topics that we don't often find ourselves having the right time, space, or conditions to discuss. Each dinner took place at the New York City home of a Barnard alum and brought together up to five students and five alums of different perspectives for a conversation facilitated by Mira. Our hope was that attendees would leave feeling like they had a better understanding of another point of view and like they were part of an amazing community — because they are. Our topics came from alumnae like the one mentioned above; over our four dinners, we discussed feminism, our approaches to political engagement and news media, and how each of us thought about our power — all honestly, openly, and completely off the record.

”

“I wanted participants to hear each other out but also disagree with one another. Be unafraid to ‘say the right thing’ but also take accountability when they inevitably say something problematic or hurtful. In short, the gatherings were designed to encourage participation that moved the conversation about that night's topic forward.”

Mira Nayak '27

The feedback — like the quote at the top of this page — was so good, we're keeping this program going. Keep an eye on our social media and newsletter for the dates for fall 2024 and spring 2025 dinners, and if you're an alum, sign up and join us!



“I feel lucky to feel as inspired as I do.

I feel that I am equipped with the tool kit that is required to change the world someday, and I am prepared to take both the baby and giant steps needed to reach my goals.”

Lauren Woodruffe '26
Spring 2024 Athena Fellow

At Athena, we know that the challenges we face won't be solved by a single person, through a single approach, or in a single try.

That's why, at Athena, applied learning happens in community. We build and support multiple **communities of practice** – spaces for aspiring, emerging, and experienced changemakers to come together to practice leading change through entrepreneurship, advocacy, policy and government, technology, research and scholarship, film, and more.

Each of our communities of practice is curated, co-created, facilitated, co-curricular, and time-limited; participants receive a stipend, to help them make the commitment. And all aim to help these diverse and accomplished students become more creative, collaborative, courageous, and conscious of impact on others and on themselves.

In 2023–2024, **229** students took part in one or more of our **22** communities of practice at Athena. In them, students received guidance from **7** guest experts and support from **8** partners at Barnard and beyond.

In the coming pages, we zoom in, through a look at a few of these remarkable students. In Avalon's story, you'll see how a natural builder learned how to level up. In Mariame's, you'll see a compassionate, deeply empathetic leader leverage community and care as an advocate for change. In Katerina's, you'll spot the powerful role of mentorship. From the stories of Rosie, Grace, and Rachel, you'll see how Athena opens new doors, and in Wynee's and Tandile's stories, you'll recognize a narrative of return: to Athena, to past projects, and to their communities with fresh insights.

We zoom out, too – looking at how groups of these students came together and what they did, with spotlights on our entrepreneurship, journalism, and storytelling communities of practice.

In each section, the throughline remains the same: The future of changemaking is here – and Athena will support all of its faces at every turn with resources, intentional community, training, and space to put learning into practice.

2023–2024 COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Athena Advocacy Institute

Summer 2024

Improve your skills as an advocate alongside your peers. You find the internship at a nonprofit organization (we'll help!), and we provide the programming and a stipend.

The Athena Advocacy Institute is funded by the Francene Rodgers '67 Athena Fellowship Fund, the Marina Weitzner Lewin '80 Internship Fund, the Carol Krongold Silberstein '69 and Alan Silberstein Public Service and Internship Fund, and the Daphne Fodor Philipson '69 Fund for Women's Leadership.

Athena Incubator

Fall 2023 through Spring 2024

Move your business forward with the support of our Entrepreneur in Residence, a small stipend, and other student entrepreneurs. Led by Expert in Residence Alexandra Ruiz-Olivo.

Director's Cohort

Spring 2024

Create momentum and take an in-progress project to the next level with the help of the Athena Center's director and your peers. All members must have previously participated in an Athena experience.

Ringside with Athena

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

Deepen your understanding of entrepreneurship and build tools for wellness as you box with the co-founders of HAVEN, a radically inclusive and social-impact-oriented boxing gym.

Succession Planning

Spring 2024

Learn strategies for facilitating smooth (or as smooth as possible) transitions for your passion project — whether that means new leadership, a new vision, or endings!

Athena Digital Design UX

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

Join other students interested in technology as a tool for social change. Explore user experience design in a stress-free environment and apply your new skills to a project. Led by Expert in Residence Natalie Valcourt.

Barnard Bulletin x Athena

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

Join other aspiring journalists and staff writers/editors of the "Barnard Bulletin" to learn about article writing, editing, publishing and the basics of conducting interviews. Led by journalist Julianna Goldman '23.

Finding Your Place in the Social Change Ecosystem

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

Join the social change ecosystem: identify your role(s) as a changemaker, create a leadership action plan & make new friends in this 3-part lunch series!

Storytelling for Change

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

Learn how to make compelling stories about issues that matter with the guidance of a rotating series of guest experts. Storytelling method chosen by each semester's expert. Led by Experts in Residence Ranjani Chakraborty and Ugonna Okpalaoka.

Take the Mic, Take Action!

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

Learn how to lead thoughtful and constructive conversations about our energy and climate challenges — and then start to moderate those conversations. In sessions sponsored by the Center for Global Energy Policy, participants will learn how to improve their public speaking skills and how to successfully moderate panels. Facilitated by Jessica Weis.

Athena Fellows

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

Propose a specific challenge, identify a faculty advisor, commit 10-4:30 every Friday for a semester to tackling that challenge, and receive a stipend.

Dialogue & Difference

Fall 2023 through Spring 2024

Learn how to facilitate dialogue that is difficult, vulnerable, and challenging. Hosted in collaboration with the Center for Engaged Pedagogy, students will foster environments of learning and inclusion through facilitation. Led by guest facilitators Alex Pittman and Danielle-Hope Hayden.

Laidlaw Scholar Leadership & Research Program

Summer 2023 through Spring 2024

Refine your research skills with guidance from a faculty mentor during your first summer. Spend Summer 2 working with communities to make change. Co-led by Beyond Barnard.

The Laidlaw Scholars Program is funded by the Laidlaw Foundation.

Student Advisory Board

Fall 2023 through Spring 2024

Advise Athena, help shape the Center's programming, and build community, all while learning how to become a successful nonprofit board member.

Williams Program for Women in Politics

Summer 2023

Explore government as an avenue and policy as a tool for tackling intractable challenges. You find the internship (we'll help!), and we provide the programming and a stipend. Led by Expert in Residence Emma Wolfe '01.

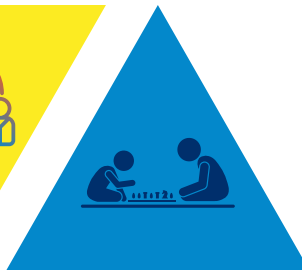
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE :: OUR MODEL

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

A space where students connect with peers with similar interests, explore Athena's wider network, and envision collaborations across Barnard's ecosystem to advance change

EXPERT GUIDANCE

Facilitation, practical guidance, and 1:1 mentorship from an Expert in Residence + Applied Learning team



CO-CURRICULAR

A nongraded space to take on changemaking through a particular method, backed by a curricular arc and planned activities

TIME-LIMITED EXPERIENCE

A clearly defined commitment with expectations and guidelines for engagement



PARTICIPATORY LEARNING

Programming that is co-created and informed by ongoing student feedback, interest, and aspiration

INCENTIVE

Resources that help make the commitment more accessible for students, whether it's a stipend, dinner, or leadership materials

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE :: OUR INTENDED OUTCOMES

In a 2018 study,* researchers found that students who availed themselves of opportunities for co-curricular learning during college were nine (yes, nine!) times more likely to develop innovation capacities (e.g., the ability to persist after a setback, generate new ideas, work across difference).

In 2020, Athena relaunched itself as a place where Barnard students could reach beyond the positional leadership they'd already attained (and which, as eventual women's college graduates, they're likely to enjoy in the future!). Athena relaunched itself as home for changemakers.

Those of us who consider ourselves experienced changemakers know the importance of pushing beyond binaries and seeing multiple ways of tackling a problem. We recognize how hard it is to figure out how to lead when everyone around you is also a leader. We're sympathetic to the pressures perfectionists put upon themselves and understand imperfect steps forward are the only way. We're aware of how critical it is to think hard about the impact we don't intend just as much as the impact we do.

For the aspiring and emerging changemakers at Barnard, to participate in a community of practice means to prioritize the development of changemaker capacities like the ones described on this page. Through the experience, they'll grow – in many cases, while creating a project or portfolio item – and, in all cases, while strengthening their sense of self, their relationships with one another, and their sense of belonging to our extraordinary network.

In a world urgently needing intriguing solutions to pressing issues, our co-curricular, applied learning offerings – through our communities of practice and pipeline programming where students have space to engage in hands-on risk-taking by developing thoughtful, creative interventions – are Athena's mission in action.

CREATIVITY

Creative changemakers are able to see beyond just one answer to a pressing issue or question; instead, they envision many more paths to addressing a challenge and new connections between concepts.

COLLABORATION

Collaborative changemakers actively participate in the world around them and co-create their own learning when addressing an issue. Opportunities to teach, as well as learn from others, are seen as valuable – not deficits.

COURAGE

Courageous changemakers are willing to explore ideas different from their own and go where the learning takes them. They reject perfectionism, put their work out into the world, and seek feedback to get better.

CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

Conscientious changemakers are able to explore how their interventions can affect themselves and the communities they are working with. Reflection, humility, and grace for self and others is part of their changemaking process.

Adapted from the Social Change Model for Leadership Development

*For more, read Benjamin S. Selznick and Matthew J. Mayhew's article "Measuring Undergraduates' Innovation Capacities," published in the September 2018 issue of "Research in Higher Education."

Avalon Fenster '24

Huntington, Long Island



“Athena is the dream of Barnard come to life.”

Avalon Fenster’s Athena story starts in July 2021, the summer before her sophomore year at Barnard, when she launched a mutual aid effort at Barnard. As class president, Avalon had been having lots of conversations about the needs on campus, especially in light of COVID; the financial needs stood out, of course, but “showing young women, in particular, that in their times of need there was somewhere that they could turn to was really, really important to me.” She started it by herself, by posting to Instagram — and nearly instantly, there were thousands and thousands of dollars that were raised, and there were also thousands and thousands of dollars of requests. Around the same time, she’d started a community closet. That too was an immediate success — maybe too successful, actually. “I remember sitting on my bed, looking at all the boxes and bags that people had dropped off, and realizing I could not do this alone. Even if it was something I was able to start alone.”

In search of support, Avalon found the Athena Fellows program. That it would provide her with an environment of peers all working toward something that mattered to them — peers who, in her words, were “thinking and doing at the same time” — was deeply appealing. The program gave her the space to develop critical skills, but “honestly, more than that, it was just incredibly helpful for me to recognize, for the first time, that so much of what I could do was tied up in how I was treating myself,” says Avalon. “That was the most meaningful thing for me.” At first, Avalon had intended to use her time in the program to expand the mutual aid project; she had tons of ideas for new things she wanted to do. “And then, once I got there, I realized that newness isn’t necessarily always effective. What *is* effective is strengthening what you already have. The goal of leadership is not just infinite expansion, it’s actually about making sure what’s right in front of you is solid enough to last.”

Avalon ultimately decided to use her time in the program to develop a leadership structure that wasn’t dependent on one person; while many of her peers were focused on starting something, she was focused on ending something, in a sense — for herself, anyway. That ending would turn out to be crucial for Avalon, because it allowed her to create a new beginning, through an initiative that would end up changing her life in ways she couldn’t have imagined at the time.



“Athena helped me understand the mental and emotional process of pursuing and eventually achieving one’s goals. I would come into Athena for a conversation and it would be 50% business and 50% how I was doing, how I was feeling, what I was going through at that particular moment in time. At the end of it, the two would always connect — and whoever I was talking to, whoever the mentor was in that moment, would help me identify how the two were connecting. That really impacted my approach to Internship Girl and the way I now mentor young women who live dramatically different lives than I do.

After being involved with Athena, I navigate the world as a person who understands that everything really is all connected, and you can’t approach any particular issue without understanding its layers and complexity, who it comes back to and what it comes back to.”

Avalon Fenster ’24

In January 2022, Avalon launched Internship Girl, a platform that gives young women the support they need to succeed in their early careers — something she'd spent a lot of time thinking about as an intern at Pay Our Interns during her first year at Barnard. Today, the Instagram and TikTok accounts have generated over 200 million views, and the resources she has created have been accessed over 200,000 times.

Reflecting on its early days, Avalon says, "It was really helpful to know that there was somewhere on campus where I could go and talk about this project. Because it wasn't an academic project, I couldn't really go to a particular department or my advisor, and though it was professional, at the time it was in such an early stage that not many people would take it seriously. Athena was really the only place where I could go and people understood what I was doing and why I was doing it, a hundred percent. And Athena helped me always recenter on the why, when things would get tough and leading it would get tiring."

That support was something Avalon came to rely on, not just for Internship Girl or, before that, her mutual aid work but for all of her projects — and more broadly, for her vision of who she wants to become. She recalls a conversation she had here, at a moment when she felt like she was hitting a ceiling — and after a little encouragement, a little strategizing, and some conversations with Huma Abedin thanks to a class Avalon was taking at SIPA, she was working for Hillary Clinton.



"I don't know if I would have had the confidence to go over and tap on someone's shoulder, who is leaps and bounds my senior, to introduce myself and offer myself up for an opportunity. But I had the voice of Athena in my ear, telling me that not only was that possible, but it was completely rational."

Avalon Fenster '24

In her junior year, Avalon got to take part in a completely different Athena experience: SPARK. As part of SPARK that year, Athena, in partnership with the Kraft Center for Jewish Life, screened a portion of the stunning three-part PBS series "The U.S. and the Holocaust." Co-directed by Sarah Botstein '94, the series sheds light on what the U.S. government and Americans knew and did — and did not do — as Hitler rose to power. It wasn't hard for Athena and Kraft to pick a student moderator for the postscreening conversation with Botstein and Deborah Lauter, executive director of the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Education and Human Rights: Avalon, herself the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, was the obvious choice.

The experience was profoundly meaningful for Avalon, "because there were people there who had never really talked about anything related to antisemitism or Jewish people that I was able to have an impact on by sitting there and talking about my own story and being part of two other women talking about their stories and their relationships to the topic."

"That experience exemplifies what I think Athena really tries to do, which is bringing people together from different positionalities and showing them that they actually really have shared goals and shared interests and shared dreams. Being able to be a small part of that was very, very special to me."

* * *

Avalon is now a first-year law student at Cornell University. The mutual aid initiative she started here is still thriving, as is Internship Girl. And so is she.

Mariame Sissoko '24

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



From the beginning of their time at Barnard, we knew **Mariame Sissoko '24** would become an “Athena superstar”: that’s a literal quote from Applied Learning Program Manager Erika Guzman’s notes on Mariame’s application for Athena’s 2020 ThirdSpace@Barnard program. In that unusual, unsettling pandemic year, ThirdSpace gave Barnard students the opportunity to both connect with one another in an isolating time while also making change in their home communities.

Through ThirdSpace, Mariame amplified the racial justice work of a youth organization in Philadelphia. Once on campus, the work continued. As a Spring 2022 Athena Fellow, Mariame worked to enhance the racial justice programming and educational initiatives in the Philadelphia public school system, which they’d attended. As a summer 2023 participant in the Athena Advocacy Institute, Mariame not only created a community for the 2023 AAI cohort but also established a new group for Gen Z queer youth at the LGBT Center downtown, where they held their summer internship. And as a member of Athena’s Student Advisory Board for multiple years, Mariame nurtured community right here in the Center.

Mariame was an academic superstar too. As one of a very few first-year student participants in Undesign the Redline, Mariame worked on an innovative engaged learning initiative in which students, faculty, staff, and Harlem residents created an on-campus exhibition about the history of redlining in the Harlem and Morningside Heights communities. Mariame would also go on to receive many accolades. To name just two: As a sophomore, Mariame became a Mellon Mays Scholar and, as a senior, was selected by a panel of their peers, professors, and the Dean of the College to provide an academic reflection on behalf of the Class of 2024 at their Commencement.

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Mariame’s sophisticated understanding of what it means to **really** be in community, and their willingness to do the messy, difficult work of creating and holding space for diverse groups of people to come together, is visible in everything they do. In their Athena experiences, in their ongoing work in their hometown, and as student body president this past year, one can clearly see Mariame’s gift for seeing the complexity in people and complexity in the world and making empathetic choices that honor all that complexity.

That’s in part because for Mariame, this work is personal. As a nonbinary, Black student with a range of life experiences, they know firsthand the many ways people can be left out of conversations and spaces meant to represent them.



“Athena was where I could grapple with hard questions. It was where I could take all the interconnected threads of who I am and what I was doing, put all of the different ways I existed at Barnard together, and weave a tapestry of my own.”

Mariame Sissoko '24

Over time, the formal role Athena played in Mariame’s growth as a leader, through programs like ThirdSpace, Fellows, and AAI, evolved into a more informal but no less impactful role. Looking back on it all now, Mariame says, “Athena was my safe haven.”

In their visits to the Center during their senior year, Mariame would be both a mentor to other students and a constant learner, welcoming insight from as many perspectives as possible – from staff to alums, current students, and faculty members alike. Mariame did this to ensure that they were taking their campus responsibilities seriously, as well as to ensure that they were contributing to a more equitable society where more people, rather than fewer, are included. The Center served both as a space of support and a space that could push them further. That’s the culture around here, after all. In Mariame’s own words: “Because of Athena, I’m okay with being challenged. I’m okay with not being sure, and still knowing that I’m doing the best I can.”

In so many ways, Mariame’s story is a quintessential Athena story: continually getting comfortable with being uncomfortable, sitting with questions that have no easy answer, finding what you need from within yourself and from the resources all around you, and having the courage to push for the change you want to see in the world.



“There’s what I want the future to look like and then there’s the practical reality of the world around us — people who don’t agree with you, your limited resources, your own positionality. My Athena experiences are what allows me to exist in that gap, to still strive towards the world I want while being okay with the practical reality of the way things are.”

Mariame Sissoko '24

We still have a long way to go before we live in the world Mariame dreams of, but every day, their work brings us closer.

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Rosie Elliott '24

Miami, Florida



Grace Schleck '24

Metuchen, New Jersey



If we've done our job right, Athena is just one stop on the journey for Barnard students – a place to unlock one's potential and unleash an idea ... and then, anything is possible.

For two members of the Class of 2024, [Rosie Elliott '24](#) and [Grace Schleck '24](#), a post-Athena stop was Barnard's Movement Lab: a space for experimentation and exploration at the intersection of movement, performance, and technology – and a space where they'd see projects developed at Athena take entirely different forms and shapes.



Rosie Elliott '24, a double major in dance and women's, gender, and sexuality studies, began studying ballet at the age of 7. She loved learning the art form, but the experience wasn't without its challenges. In "An age of inclusivity: How Rosie Elliot, BC '24, is creating space for themselves, and others, in the dance community," published in the "Columbia Spectator" on May 12, 2023, Joyce Zhang writes:

"Ballet's codified artistic expression made Elliot recognize gender's presence in the dance form; the lack of diversity and gender inclusivity stuck out of the corps de ballet like a sore thumb. Gender was central to ballet class etiquette and performance roles, they said, and stigmatized sub-styles created an 'immediate kind of disengagement from class ... tapped out of [a] space that should be a protected world of joy.'"

Rosie used their time as a Spring 2022 Athena Fellow to advance "REmove Collective," a project challenging gender binaries in ballet spaces and professional dance as a whole. That fall, as a junior, Rosie brought all they'd learned through their Fellows experience to support the next cohort as its student lead – and then turned the rest of their junior year into an exploration of playfulness and joy in everyday life. In spring 2023, as a Student Artist-in-Residence at the Movement Lab, Rosie designed an interactive piece that invited audience members "to embrace mess and play as they watch creative destruction and utopian world-building collide." Now, as a Teaching Artist for Americorps ArtistYear, Rosie is sharing their love of performance and mentorship with the newest generation of performers, helping them grow in their own expansive, joyful ways.

Jointly administered by Beyond Barnard and the Athena Center for Leadership, the Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Program gives first- and second-year students the opportunity to conduct research and hands-on experience working in communities advancing change over the course of two summers. Grace Schleck '24 joined the program with an interest in sustainability, disability, and the use of natural materials in built environments.

During the program, Grace worked with Dr. Lola Ben-Alon to explore these themes through interviews with architects, homeowners, and builders. Grace co-authored "Eco-Ableism and Access Circularity in Natural Building" (2024), published in "Frontiers of Architectural Research,"

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“I want to thank Athena for doing an amazing job facilitating conversations about what it means to lead ethically.”

Grace Schleck '24

At the Movement Lab, Grace continued her work through an entirely different medium: visual art. As a Student Artist-in-Residence, Grace designed an exhibition titled "Mycelium Movement."

The "Mycelium Movement" project explores pathways where mycelium becomes a partner in low-carbon and bio-based design. This multimedia installation unites collaborators across architecture, material science, mycology, food science, wild foraging, and the arts. Set in the Movement Lab with physical mycelium bio-design samples, "Mycelium Movement" aims to illuminate the movements of mycelium across scales: microscopically as a material, regionally as a resource, and communally as a connector between disciplines.

The exhibition featured the Dirty Mycelium and Mycelium Under the Microscope projects from the Columbia University GSAPP Natural Materials Lab, "MYCRO: Illuminating the World of Funga and Microbes," and Kali Mushrooms.

In her artist statement, Grace posed the question "How can we collectively build a more symbiotic future?"

And now, as an urban planner based in Boston, Grace is still working to not only find but create an answer.



Katerina Kaganovich '24

Fort Lee, New Jersey



“It’s so empowering to know that someone is in your corner.”

Katerina Kaganovich '24 majored in law and justice – not here at Barnard but at her magnet high school, which is where she first decided that she wanted to become a lawyer.

“I’ve had the privilege and the burden of knowing what I want to do since I was a high schooler,” says Katerina. “It’s a privilege because it gives me a goal, and it’s a burden because the goal is so far away and you just want to get there.”

At Barnard, Katerina stayed laser-focused on that goal, pursuing every possible – and we do mean *every* possible – opportunity to explore and deepen this interest, both through her academics and through multiple internships. During the school year, Katerina interned at the U.S. Attorney’s Office in lower Manhattan as well as at the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia. As for her summers, Katerina says, “I’ve had three really spectacular summer internships, one of which was connected to the Athena Center with the Williams Program on Women in Politics” – in the Division of Civil Rights at the New Jersey Attorney General’s office, which is where she spent her Williams summer; at the Supreme Court of the United States; and in the Division of Privacy and Identity Protection at the Federal Trade Commission.



“I was really drawn to the Williams Program. [During that summer], I was interning at the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights. They had just created the community relations unit, and it was me and the supervisor of the division — I was the only employee in this division. From that experience, I learned how to relate to a community and how to engage a community in socially progressive work. I found the guest speakers and conversations we had as Williams Fellows really helpful for contextualizing the work that I was doing in my internship.

Having to forgo working and earning money over the summer sometimes shuts quality applicants out of trying unpaid internships and opportunities that are necessary to get their foot in the door. Programs like Williams that offer stipends to students who are interested in trying out these fields or making a step forward in these fields are extremely important. Because unfortunately, too many internships are still unpaid.”

Katerina Kaganovich '24

The goal is a little closer for Katerina now; she’s in her first year at Yale Law School and loving it!

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The Williams Program for Women in Politics is funded by Constance Hess Williams '66, who also funded the Directorship of the Athena Center. Thank you, Connie, for having been in our corner from the very start!

Wynee Pintado '24

Queens, New York



Wynee Pintado '24 is what we at Athena fondly call a superuser – a student who, once she discovers how Athena can support her, never looks back. Among other things, Wynee was a member of the Athena Fellows program, Director's Cohort, and Succession Planning communities of practice. Athena's Post-Baccalaureate Fellow Ellie George '23 caught up with Wynee shortly before she graduated this past spring for a conversation about her time here.

Field Note: Wynee Pintado '24

by Ellie George '23

Wynee Pintado '24 joined the Director's Cohort in Fall 2023 to work on the podcast she started two years prior, "Inmigración Descifrado," which targets immigration misinformation. The Director's Cohort, led by Athena's Constance Hess Williams '66 Director, Umbreen Bhatti, offers students the time and space they need to focus on in-progress projects, coupled with coaching and support. Wynee, a senior with eyes toward graduation, wanted to grow "Inmigración Descifrado" beyond herself and pass the project on to new leadership.

Wynee created "Inmigración Descifrado" during 2021 as a sophomore in the very first cohort of the Athena Fellows community of practice. But back then, it wasn't a fully developed podcast yet. Wynee set out to explore the legal side of immigration, recording interviews with anyone she could find who engaged with the immigration process either professionally or personally, including a criminal defense attorney and an immigration lawyer whom she met through the Barnard network. The interviews led to her final Athena Fellows project – a prototype for the podcast, in the form of an episode for "Radio Impacto," a local radio show in Jackson Heights, about the 10 most common misconceptions about immigration.

"Immigration is not as straightforward a process as you may think," Wynee reflects on starting the podcast. "Experiences vary. For example, one person's experience applying for asylum will not look like another's, even though they seek the same thing. That's what I revealed in the first episode – clearing up misconceptions about immigration processes and exposing the discrepancies and complications in the system."

If you had asked Wynee back then if her project was complete, she would have agreed. There were no more loose ends; her episode for "Radio Impacto" could stand alone. But as she entered her junior year, immigration questions still pervaded her mind. Wynee continued to reach out to lawyers, community members, and students to hear their stories. That's when the idea for "Inmigración Descifrado" came about.

That summer of 2023, between her junior and senior years, Wynee partnered with Info al Desnudo, a Spanish-language media company out of New York City that provides news led by community activists, and pitched her own segment, using her "Radio Impacto" episode as an example. Info al Desnudo provided Wynee with a larger audience, weekly structure, and dedicated online episode archive. By the end of the summer, the show had gained 300 subscribers.

"I thought, 'This is actually getting attention! People want to listen!' Wynee laughs. "That's when I decided to continue 'Inmigración Descifrado' and see how far I could take it.

"My senior fall, I heard that Athena Center's director, Umbreen, was making the Director's Cohort. I signed up, thinking that it could provide me the time and space to figure out how to bring 'Inmigración Descifrado' to its next evolution."

The Director's Cohort helped Wynee learn how to leverage her own networks to recruit new team members. Wynee established new roles too, including a host, outreach coordinator, video editor, and social media manager. The new workflow is as follows: The host and outreach coordinator research and recruit guests, then conduct preliminary interviews before recording the real deal. The video and audio files are passed to the editor and social media manager, who then create promotional materials.

"Within two days after posting the opportunities, around 40 people applied. The lesson I learned here is that once you start something and you've gained a community of people, they will continue branching out, and that's how you grow.

"There was one moment when I was working with Umbreen, and she asked me what the transition would look like now that I have a team, taking the approach of an advisor rather than an active team member. I was used to doing things on my own and getting things done in the manner I wanted to, but now I needed to learn how to delegate certain tasks and keep track of people."

When she first began building "Inmigración Descifrado," Wynee thought leadership meant advocating for the causes that she cared about. But since the Director's Cohort – and before that, the Athena Fellows program – her definition has expanded. No longer is leadership limited to her own advocacy; now, her practice includes finding ways to extend the opportunity to others. In this case, it means learning how to step down.

It's all coming full circle in spring 2024, Wynee's final semester at Barnard. She aims to close out her chapter on "Inmigración Descifrado" within the Succession Planning community of practice, which brings together other similarly situated student creators to consider the life span of a project or idea and how it lives beyond their individual participation. Led by guest expert Swati Apte, Wynee and the other members of the cohort are digging into the kinds of questions that Wynee uncovered during her Director's Cohort experience. For Wynee, having new infrastructure for the podcast makes answering those questions easier – and being able to draw from Swati's guidance as she does so is an enormous help.

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“To anyone else who wants to advocate for an issue but feels unsure how to go about it: just be wide open and receptive to people, their criticisms, and advice. You never know when someone can spark an idea about how to change your approach.”

Wynee Pintado '24

At Athena, Barnard students can find the community and resources they need to dive deep into their interests and create something new. But Athena also provides space to think through the life cycle of a project – from bringing it into the world to ending it with purpose or, as in Wynee's case, passing it into the next set of hands. Making room for others provides them with a legacy of opportunity; for Wynee, it makes room for new beginnings.

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Tandile Jackson-Vinson '24

Hampton Roads, Virginia



Tandile Jackson-Vinson '24 graduated this past spring after a busy time at Barnard. As an undergraduate Africana studies major, she also held internships on and off campus focused on social justice education at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and politics. In the midst of this journey, Tandile intersected with Athena as a junior, when she was accepted into the Fall 2022 Athena Fellows cohort.

Initially, Tandile came to Athena to tell the stories of inequality and, specifically, the unequal treatment of Black birthers (regardless of gender identity) encountered as they navigate the reproductive health system and medical racism. In the first weeks of the Fellows Program, Tandile wrestled with the acknowledgment that – in scholarship and media – traumatic stories are often used to validate Black pain in a world that ignores it. As a Black person with multiple overlapping identities, Tandile was also simultaneously holding the grief of what it means to tell stories of trauma about communities dear to her. About a month into the program, Tandile came to Chriss, the Director of Applied Learning, to ask if that was really the story she had to tell. In response, Chriss asked, “What would you dream of otherwise?”

For the rest of the semester, Tandile answered that question by creating a project that conjured a world where Black people – and all people – had access to reproductive health, the care they need to thrive, and the liberation to pursue easeful lives full of autonomy and self-determination. Through the podcast “Our Village Healers: A Collection of Reproductive Histories and Futures,” Tandile wove together the voices of activists, scholars, and practitioners – from birth workers in Mali to academics from across the country – who are dreaming up liberation stories for Black communities.

After taking a year away, Tandile came back to Athena as the Spring 2024 Athena Fellows Student Lead. Using her personal experience as a Black student in a PWI, along with her passion for community work, Tandile was excited to use her time as a Student Lead to create inclusive communities with other Barnard students interested in making positive change. In addition to mentoring her peers all semester, including leveraging her connections to the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault program for another Fellow, Tandile facilitated a workshop on positionality and changemaking to advance the Spring 2024 cohort’s ability to make thoughtful decisions about their projects and support each other along the way.

Through her experiences at Athena, Tandile deepened her commitment to telling important stories while balancing joy, burnout, and creating the world she wants to see. At the same time, she also leaned into what it means to build connections with people across identities and making space for them to show up exactly how they are.



“My experience in the Athena Fellows Program prepared me for the creative, liberatory work I strive to do. I always imagined myself in a specific role as a healer and educator, and while that’s true, the program challenged me to fill gaps in my understanding and see all the ways I could make an impact. The program pushed me to ask difficult questions and constantly reexamine my approach to community health questions. I grew so much as a storyteller and came out with a much stronger sense of my role as a community member and changemaker. Beyond my project, my experiences with Athena have truly motivated me to always seek new perspectives, skills, and experiences. I’m a much more creative thinker and a stronger collaborator because of my time at Athena.”

Tandile Jackson-Vinson '24

Rachel Burns '24

Brunswick, Maine



Most Barnard students meet Athena through orientation programming, or by way of comfy couches, puzzles, and the Center’s “good vibes.” But those weren’t options available to **Rachel Burns ’24** when she matriculated into Barnard during the Fall 2020 remote semester. Instead, she took a more straightforward approach: emailing Center Director Umbreen Bhatti ’00, asking how to get involved.

“That was my first action item from Umbreen – to join SAB,” Rachel laughs.

The Student Advisory Board (SAB) plays an essential role at Athena: Members advise the Center on its programming for students, work to create a sense of community for all Athena students, and learn how to leverage board positions to create change.

For Rachel, SAB served as a perfect entryway into the Athena ecosystem. It provided her with a strong community and a sense of how she could develop as a changemaker in the coming years.

“While serving on SAB, I joined BUILD, a community of practice through ThirdSpace@, a virtual co-curricular program during the pandemic where students connected what they learned in the classroom to the challenges that existed outside of it. I was in Virginia at the time, so I created an art-based after-school program because the pandemic was very hard on children.”

BUILD inspired Rachel to seek out social impact communities once she returned to Barnard’s in-person campus for her sophomore year. She joined the Athena Policy and Changemaking Community of Practice, which helped her network with experienced policymakers and gave her the confidence to apply to internships. The following summer, as a member of the Athena Advocacy Institute, she worked for the Resolution Project, an NYC nonprofit that supports social change through entrepreneurship – the same organization where Athena’s own chief of staff, Victoria Lesourd, worked before Athena. Rachel came to Athena in search of community, and now, her community at Athena helped her reach beyond Barnard.

At the beginning of her junior year, Rachel wanted to learn more about how to create large-scale impact starting with her own skills, abilities, and community. She joined Protest as a Tool for Change, a community of practice that invites student organizers to explore how to use protest in effective ways – and helps them build community with one another.

In her final year at Barnard, Rachel focused on developing her sustainable clothing business, Handmade 4 Hotties, in the Athena Incubator. She handcrafts garments as part of her inclusive brand made to combat fast fashion and promote self-love – all part of her goal to make the world more sustainable.

“How has Athena changed me?” Rachel asks. “I am confident that changemaking is something that I am already very capable of. Sometimes people don’t fully trust themselves – I think leadership is about regifting your power to yourself.”

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“I came into Athena thinking leadership was individualistic — that you had to be the loudest voice with the biggest role. Now, I think it’s being mindful of everyone else that’s working with you as well, and figuring out what other people need and how to best support them and support yourself.”

Rachel Burns ’24



Julianna Goldman '03
Guest Expert
Bulletin x Athena



“It was a really cool experience.

Especially from a Barnard alumna, hearing her experience and how it could be possible for young women like us to do something similar.”

Sunaya Mueller '27

This highlight was adapted from a November 2023 Athena Field Note, available on our website.

SPOTLIGHT :: Bulletin x Athena

Fall 2023 - Spring 2024

Sunaya Mueller '26 arrived on campus last year with her sights set on joining a journalistic publication, only to find that Barnard's newspaper, "The Barnard Bulletin," had gone dark during the pandemic. She wanted to be a part of a community of aspiring journalists, especially women journalists, and create a comfortable environment where everyone is excited to learn and grow. Could Sunaya resurrect the "Bulletin"? It seemed daunting – she would need to recruit and train new members and build a website, all informed by her vision for a new era of journalism at Barnard.

So she came to Athena.

Sunaya and Athena created a game plan to bring the "Bulletin" back to Barnard. Sunaya would provide the participants, and Athena would provide the resources. Athena connected Sunaya with Julianna Goldman '03, a longtime reporter for Bloomberg and former White House correspondent during the Obama administration, who agreed to share her expertise and help train the new cohort. They met every Monday for five weeks – the students together on campus, while Julianna joined remotely from her home in Washington, D.C.

Students learned a *lot* from Julianna. But the most helpful thing, by far, were the live editing sessions Julianna led. Julianna loaded a current draft of a "Bulletin" article up on the room's big screen and edited it live, transforming the article from the first draft to the final draft. "She would switch around the article in different places," said Sunaya. "Talking about 'Oh, you need the lede here and a quote there,' how to write in the present tense, and which adjectives to use. Those skills are priceless."

Beyond the skills, Sunaya has two big takeaways from the experience: first, that she's certain that "Bulletin" staff can enter professional journalism with a sense of confidence and, second, that this experience created a supportive community that she can turn to upon the next new idea – about journalism and beyond.



Ugonna Okpalaoka
Guest Expert
Storytelling for Change



“I loved working with Ugonna. She always brought a positive source of information and inspiration with her to each meeting, making me excited to do the work for the following class. I really enjoyed her willingness to connect with us as well and hope to keep in touch with her in the future.

Storytelling for Change allowed me to make new friends with people outside of my class year here at Barnard. Happily, it also taught me to take creative risks and how to value my own ideas and personal voice.”

Theresa Cullen '27

This highlight was adapted from a February 2024 Athena Field Note, available on our website.

SPOTLIGHT :: Storytelling for Change

Fall 2023

In fall 2023, Athena rolled out Storytelling for Change, a community of practice for changemakers interested in harnessing the art of visual and narrative storytelling methods to champion their causes.

Guided by guest expert Ugonna Okpalaoka, participants took on three interconnected projects: a photo essay, an audio story, and a video about their causes, honing their technical and creative skills through their individual projects while building community – and the skills of giving and receiving feedback – with one another.

As a storyteller herself, Ugonna has created a powerful body of work, amplifying narratives from women, immigrants, queer individuals, and overlooked communities through her work on documentaries, short films, and more – for example, as co-producer of “Picturing the Obamas,” a feature-length documentary.

Ugonna leveraged her extensive network for the benefit of our students too, bringing other experts into the community, such as Ranjani Chakraborty (video journalist and producer at Vox), Mylan Cannon (photojournalist whose work can be seen in “The New York Times” and “The Boston Globe”), and Kim Fox (creator of the award-winning “Ehky Ya Masr/Tell Your Story, Egypt” podcast and a professor of practice in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Cairo). Chakraborty, Cannon, and Fox shared their go-to strategies for crafting compelling messages to foster understanding and spark action. They also offered valuable insight into their careers, providing a glimpse into the professional world of storytelling.

Participants in Storytelling for Change took on a wide range of topics through their storytelling – from gender identity to climate anxiety and navigating cultural differences. But the common thread between them was increasing the public’s awareness and understanding of their topics – key ingredients for shaping a better world.

“This community allowed me to explore my creative side in ways I never have before. It gave me the freedom to express myself on any topic,” says Jojo Manning '27. Theresa Cullen '27 concurs: “It taught me to take creative risks and how to value my own ideas and personal voice.”

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AT ATHENA

At Athena, entrepreneurship is one of the many powerful ways to lead change that students can explore and practice. We envision a world where women and nonbinary entrepreneurs have the confidence, support, and resources they need to build sustainable, equitable, and socially responsible businesses – and we welcome current Barnard and Columbia student entrepreneurs at any stage in their journey.

”

“Seeing a real-life example of people who started a business together, and all have the same intentions, morals, and philosophy, expanded my understanding of successful entrepreneurship.”

Brianna Dunkley '27

This highlight was adapted from a January 2024 Athena Field Note, available on our website.

SPOTLIGHT :: Ringside with Athena

Fall 2023, Spring 2024

In fall 2023, Athena tried something new: a collaboration with HAVEN Boxing – a woman-, nonbinary-, and POC-owned gym – on an experience where entrepreneurship-curious students could learn about a socially conscious business committed to intentional spaces of community and wellness.

The resulting community of practice, Ringside with Athena, was a three-session introduction to boxing in which each class ended with a seminar on the gym’s operations, design, and mission, led by two of HAVEN’s co-owners, Gaby and Andrea.

“Our approach at Haven is twofold: creating a safe space for all bodies not only to move but heal – and to actively talk about the toxicity within our field. Actively addressing both has naturally led to a space where we see people not just feel comfortable but have fun,” explains the HAVEN team.

Unlike fitness spaces that feel exclusive, HAVEN invites everyone, no matter their relationship with movement, to put on the gloves and step into the ring. It’s a safe space, but more importantly, it’s a brave space. Just like at Athena, doing hard things becomes that much easier with a chorus of people cheering you on.

“I had the strong sense that the instructors believed in me,” says Olivia Martinez '25, a political science and human rights major. Nina Kulkarni '27, an undeclared major, agrees. “Their encouragement made me feel safe to try something new and to feel strong in my body.”

Huge thanks to our partners for this program: the Francine A. LeFrak Foundation Center for Well-Being and, of course, our Brooklyn-based faves, HAVEN Boxing.



Alexandra Ruiz-Olivo
Entrepreneur in Residence
2023-2025



“The Athena Incubator program has given me a huge boost in confidence that allows me to further develop my business and expand my network.

The showcase where we presented our pitch decks was helpful in increasing self-confidence.

The workshops helped to set the framework for how I cultivate a pitch deck and make concrete plans for growing my business.

Alexandra Ruiz-Olivo, Athena’s Entrepreneur in Residence, and the entire Athena team really helped me minimize feelings of imposter syndrome and helped me develop my voice.”

Jazze Wingard '24

SPOTLIGHT :: A Q&A with Athena’s EIR

What was it like to lead this past year’s Athena Incubator?

I got to witness the immense personal and business growth of each student participating in the Incubator. I saw their guards come down and their courage increase as they leaned into experimenting more within their business. Each participant overcame a personal and business barrier as a result of both the curriculum and the support of the Athena Incubator community.

I was amazed at how quickly they became a community where there was comfort and trust in providing/receiving critical feedback. They were also each other’s cheerleaders throughout. That was especially important when they pitched! It was uncomfortable for the vast majority of them, but they still rose to the occasion, and I know they’ll remember the experience as another example of their limitless potential.

As an entrepreneur yourself, you’re always pivoting. Tell us about a pivot you made while running the Incubator.

Pretty early on, it was clear there were a *lot* of assumptions that needed to be challenged! That’s normal, of course, but to make it easier for them to do that work, I introduced constant experimentation (through Minimum Vial Tests, Customer Discovery Strategies, and User Research Methodologies) in order to expedite participants’ ability to learn about their customers, market, and competitors. This was a major culture shift that made a huge difference in their ability to get closer to identifying product market fit. This strategy improved business outcomes and fostered confidence in each participant.

Community is huge here at Athena. How did you navigate making connections to students as a new member of the Athena community?

In my bio and in my meetings, I share how my personal history and professional life has shaped my approach to entrepreneurship. Often, I noticed that while students booked office hours to advance their business, they often wanted advice on how to navigate their own identities, especially those they saw reflected in my story. These conversations have been powerful and inspiring for me, as I deeply connect with their struggles.

Alums are crucial to the success of all our programs at Athena – and our entrepreneurship offerings have been a powerful gateway for Athena to continue building community with Barnard changemakers, even after they graduate. For a few years now, we’ve supported alum entrepreneurs through the Columbia Startup Lab and our annual Startup Summit and Celebration of Entrepreneurship that follows it. This year, we partnered with Madeline Minshew ’09 and True Ventures to gather alum entrepreneurs for meals and community-building in New York City and San Francisco. Thank you, Madeline and True Ventures!

* * *

Samantha Greenspan ’21 is the co-founder of Skolay, a platform that connects people with best-selling authors and writers, including historians and academics, for one-on-one meetings online.

”

“The best stroke of luck a founder can have is to find one or two mentors early on who have enough experience and dedication to lend a supporting ear and hand.”

Samantha Greenspan ’21

Quoted in “From Barnard Student to Media Entrepreneur” on barnard.edu

In addition to leveraging our network, Athena offered Samantha financial support – providing nearly two-thirds of the necessary funding for her to participate in the Columbia Startup Lab, in which alums from across Columbia work to launch their entrepreneurial ventures.

In June 2024, Samantha wrapped up a two-year stint at the Columbia Startup Lab. Before she finished her term, Samantha shared her growing expertise with current Barnard students during two fireside chats hosted by Athena and at the 2024 Startup Summit.

SPOTLIGHT :: Startup Summit

Spring 2024

Four years ago, Jennifer Perusini ’10, chair of the Barnard Entrepreneurs network (BEnet), approached Athena with a question: Could we build a boot camp for Barnard entrepreneurs? A whole bunch of Zooms later (it was pandemic times then, after all), the Barnard Startup Summit was born.

Hosted by the Athena Center and BEnet, the Barnard Startup Summit is a free, in-person opportunity for student and alum entrepreneurs to work with a successful group of Barnard alums in support of their for-profit ventures and for all Barnard-connected entrepreneurs to deepen our community in person.

Each year, a student lead helps make this amazing event happen. This year, it was Lilly Montelle ’24, who embraced her first assignment, outreach, with characteristic extroversion and enthusiasm. She took the task, and the opportunity to build her network as a result, **seriously**:

“Over time, those messages, Zooms, and coffee chats led to actual relationships. I’ve never felt a stronger bond to Barnard alums, and these connections, and the perspectives and opportunities they brought, meant so much to me. As people I can reach out to for career guidance or interview advice now, these alums serve not only as professional help but also personal support.”

As for the day itself, Lilly writes, “Over lunch, I moderated a fireside chat with Eva Jeanbart-Lorenzotti ’91 – a real highlight for me, since I was able to ask Eva about various aspects of her journey. Eva shared wisdom from 33 years in the field, providing insight on all that she had experienced – my favorite, paraphrased: the ones who succeed in the entrepreneurship space are fearless and insane.”



BEnet chair Jennifer Perusini '10 (left) and Athena's Entrepreneur in Residence, Alexandra Ruiz-Olivo (right), are all smiles after the 2024 Athena Incubator showcase.

SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION

In addition to all we do for current Barnard students, Athena provides an exciting array of opportunities for high school students, from our Athena Film Festival Teen Immersive, highlighted in the next section, to our best-in-class pre-college programs, which bring hundreds of the most promising, bold, and brilliant young women in the world to our beautiful campus every summer. We're thrilled to partner with Barnard's Office of Pre-College Programs each year to build and deliver inspiring, challenging, and energizing programs that give these students a taste of what Barnard's all about!

ATHENA SUMMER INNOVATION INSTITUTE

For more than 12 years, Athena has been running a three-week intensive summer boot camp for students interested in entrepreneurship. In the summer of 2023, Lead Instructor Deepti Sharma and Program Director Malla Haridat supported more than 40 students from around the globe as they worked to build a better world.

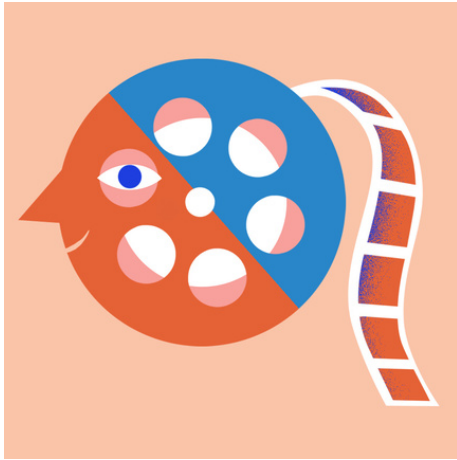
Students are guided through an ideation process that helps them better understand and articulate the issues that they care most deeply about – from housing insecurity and violence against women to gaps in our education system and the climate challenges posed by fast fashion. From there, they are grouped into teams and work together to build businesses that offer a unique solution to the issues they've identified.

Students participate in workshops on various topics, including product design and development, marketing and branding, customer research and landscape assessment, budget and startup finances, and more. Students also participate in improv workshops to help develop strong team dynamics and help students get a little bit more comfortable with public speaking. We're grateful to work with Funny Girls, a program of the Harnisch Foundation, who similarly see improv as a tool for leadership – it's one of the most popular workshops each year! Workshops are complemented by site visits to local, women-owned businesses and guest speakers, including author and CEO Joan Fallon (pictured below at right).



YOUNG WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE: LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Nearly 500 students participated in Leadership In Action, a track Athena runs for students who came to Barnard to participate in the summer Young Women's Leadership Institute. In 2023, this included a series of lectures, panel conversations, film screenings, and skill-builders that focused on three core leadership capacities: communication, collaboration, and iteration. Thank you to all of the speakers who joined us!



Founded in 2011, the Athena Film Festival is dedicated to advancing new narratives about leadership through original, thought-provoking, compelling, and diverse women-centered stories.

Today, the Athena Film Festival is where thousands gather each year to experience these stories, together – a one-of-a-kind gathering and showcase of powerful films accompanied by powerful conversations. The Athena Creative Development Program is where the creatives working on these stories find community, critical connections, and support year-round.

THANK YOU TO OUR NETWORK OF DONORS, SUPPORTERS, AND PARTNERS.

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Our founding sponsor is the Artemis Rising Foundation, led by CEO Regina K. Scully.

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The Athena Film Festival is made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

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A ONE-OF-A-KIND GATHERING & SHOWCASE :: FEB 29 – MAR 3, 2024

Four days. Three thousand attendees. Thirty-eight films and eight premieres, from 73% women or nonbinary filmmakers, with 40% identifying as women of color. Nine panels and post-screening discussions and 13 Q&As. Six receptions and two community partner events (including our Engaging Youth Voices in Our Democracy event). Twenty-five Teen Immersive students from all over the world. The 2024 Athena Film Festival was our best one yet! Keep reading for a few highlights from the experience.



OPENING NIGHT FILM

We kicked off the festival with the NY Premiere of “Copa 71,” a documentary about how the 1971 “unofficial women’s World Cup” was buried over time by systemic misogyny. Afterward, a panel of athletes, journalists, and professionals discussed “The Future of Women’s Sports” and how it continues to grow as an industry.



INTERNATIONAL FILM SPOTLIGHT

“Banu,” was one of our Saturday evening screenings, about a mother’s battle for custody of her son set against the backdrop of the 2020 Azerbaijani war. In the following Q&A, the filmmaker and star Tahmina Rafaella spoke about the importance of supporting films from countries with small film industries.



SHORTS: A PERENNIAL FAN FAVE

Returning this year were our themed shorts blocks, which included A Legacy of Change, ARTivism, and Coming of Age. Each block of short films, and their accompanying Q&A, was curated and facilitated by our programming fellows, an Athena fellowship designed to give opportunities to early career programmers.

TOWARD A FULLY ACCESSIBLE EXPERIENCE

This year, our Opening and Closing Night films featured open captions, CART services, and ASL interpreters. And at our panel Keeping the Industry Door Open: Beyond the “Trend” of Disability, creatives in the film disability community discussed breakthroughs in authentic disability representation and how to keep this momentum going. The panel was facilitated by Programming Manager Andrea Passafiume, who, as a member of the hard-of-hearing community, has worked to increase disability representation in film, and included Daisy Friedman '25, maker of the short “As You Are,” a depiction of first-time intimacy between a queer, interabled couple that screened at the festival.

Thank you to the Loreen Arbus Foundation for making this work possible!



THE ATHENA FILM FESTIVAL TEEN IMMERSIVE

In 2024, we welcomed 25 students to campus from New Orleans, Los Angeles, North Carolina, and more for the second year of the AFF Teen Immersive Program. These wonderful students attended workshops and panels with established filmmakers, including Sekiya Dorsett and Sushma Khadepaun, along festival-wide events such as our screening of “Fancy Dance” and panel on decolonizing the film industry, and got a taste of campus life through student leads and Barnard seniors Mariame Sissoko '24 and Meryt Boulos '24.

”

“I loved this whole experience! I felt so empowered by seeing so many female creatives in the panels, in workshops, and more. I loved watching the selection of films shown to us, learning from the speakers, and going to the optional screenings. I think this whole experience allowed me to find a community within film that I never thought existed before/was never exposed to where I am from. It’s usually always panels with only one female or none, so I felt very privileged to be able have been at Athena.”

Jessy Ye
2024 Athena Teen Immersive Participant

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT: NEW INITIATIVES AND ONGOING IMPACT

In addition to hosting our annual festival, we make strategic interventions that increase the likelihood of success for women-centered films. To date, we have supported over 200 creatives working on women-centered projects – the majority of whom hail from communities traditionally underrepresented in the film industry. The Athena Creative Development Programs – the Athena Writers Labs, Documentary Pitch Program, and the Athena List, as well as the multiple grants and fellowships we offer – provide these creatives with critical opportunities and a strong, supportive network.

In 2023-2024, we introduced two exciting new initiatives: a screenwriting competition to support abortion storytelling and a new award to advance Indigenous voices and storytelling – and, as always, participants in our Doc Pitch Program and spring Writers Lab gathered during the festival.

THE JAYA AWARD

Lily Gladstone was honored with an Oscar nomination, but her performance in another 2023 film, *"Fancy Dance,"* went almost unnoticed by the industry. At the 2024 festival, after a screening of Erica Tremblay's film, the director was joined by other Indigenous filmmakers for our *Decolonizing the Film Industry* panel and spoke about how to sustain industry support for authentic stories about their communities. Erica was then honored with the inaugural *Jaya Award*, sponsored by the Illumine Service Foundation, in recognition of her efforts.



THE ABORTION PIPELINE PROJECT

On October 2, 2023, the Athena Film Festival launched submissions for the *Abortion Pipeline Project (APP)*, a new fund to celebrate and support abortion stories. APP is a screenplay competition for feature-length and short narrative film scripts that center abortion.

In partnership with filmmaker Jess Jacobs, Renee Bracey-Sherman, co-executive director of We Testify, and Dr. Gretchen Sisson, lead researcher of ANSIRH's Abortion Onscreen, and with additional support from Lida Orzeck and Michela and Leslie Masson, Athena is working to identify, support, and advance more complex, dynamic, nuanced stories of abortion justice on screen to influence the public's understanding of policy and power around this crucial human rights issue. The inaugural Abortion Pipeline Project helped advance five screenplay scripts, supporting a total of six writers, including one writing team. A total of \$25,000 was dispersed as a \$5,000 grant to each project, and the writers participated in a screenwriting intensive to help them strengthen and advance their projects.

With our support (both creative writing mentorship and subject matter guidance, as well as the direct-to-artist financial grant which is so rare in the industry), the writers and projects funded through this program have improved immeasurably. We're proud to be generating a pipeline of stories that portray abortion providers and patients with compassion and nuance and look forward to tracking the progress of these projects.

AN INCREDIBLE TEAM

Putting on a festival of the caliber and ambition of ours – coupled with year-round creative development programs that are changing the game – is no small lift. We're grateful to our co-founder, Melissa Silverstein of Women and Hollywood, for her steadfast partnership, leadership, and vision.

We also want to thank the incredible, diverse, and remarkable team of consultants, advisors, and partners who work with us each year to curate the festival program, execute a seamless event experience for thousands of patrons, wrangle hundreds of volunteers, showcase our impact, and mentor dozens of writers and filmmakers – including paying it forward to the younger generation of programmers and filmmakers through our Programming Fellowship and Post-Baccalaureate Fellowship programs.

Programming Team

Melissa Silverstein
Co-Founder and Artistic Director

Donna Kozloskie & Lela Meadow-Connor
Programming Managers

Andrea Passafiume
Programming Associate

Isabella Pechaty
Athena Film Festival Post-Baccalaureate Fellow

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Director
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Athena Center

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Athena Center

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Anita Raswant & Sheli Paige Frank
Venue Captains

Creative Development Programs Team

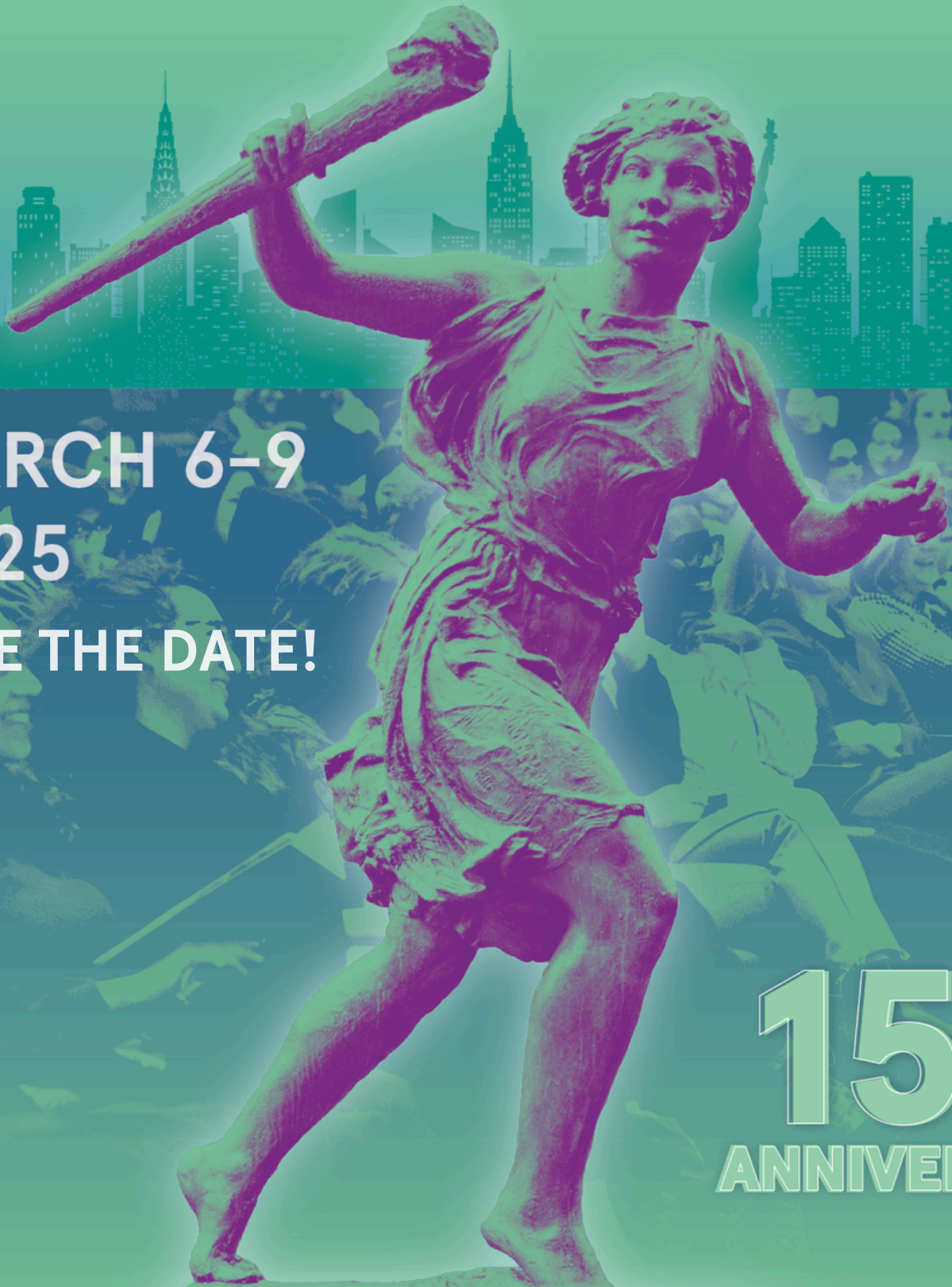
Judith Helfand
Documentary Pitch Program Producer

Daphne Pollon, Spade Robinson, Alana Sanko
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ATHENA

BARNARD COLLEGE
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FILM FESTIVAL



**MARCH 6-9
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SAVE THE DATE!

**15TH
ANNIVERSARY**

THE ARTEMIS RISING FOUNDATION FILMMAKER FELLOWS PROGRAM

Launched in fall 2022, with support from the Athena Film Festival’s founding sponsor, the Artemis Rising Foundation and its CEO Regina K. Scully, the Artemis Rising Foundation Filmmaker Fellowship (ARFFF) is a unique collaboration between Athena, the Barnard Film Program, and Barnard’s Elsie K. Sloate Media Center.

In 2023-2024, we welcomed five incredible filmmakers to campus.

Sushma Khadepaun joined Barnard in the fall of 2023 to teach a semester-long writing course on crafting a global short film from idea to screenplay, with a focus on studying contemporary international cinema.

Victoria Sendra also joined Barnard in the fall of 2023 to teach a mini-course workshop on camera and movement. This production class focused on exploring camera angles, framing, movement, storyboarding, blocking (choreography), shoot prep, and editing.

In the spring, we welcomed three fellows: Dafina Roberts led a section on writing for television, helping 19 (!) students draft their own teleplay; documentary filmmaker Yaël Bitton joined us from Paris to lead a mini-course on the art and craft of editing using found footage as source material, and Mridu Chandra led a short course in archival storytelling.

We’re thrilled to be a part of this unique opportunity for established film industry practitioners and media experts to come to Barnard and teach, mentor, and coach students.

”

“This was one of the best screenwriting classes I’ve taken so far. I really appreciated the structure of the feedback sessions as well as the structure of the deadlines. I also really enjoyed all the shorts we watched and the professor’s knowledge on all aspects of screenwriting and filmmaking.”

Student in Sushma Khadepaun’s class
Crafting the Global Short



Writer-director Sushma Khadepaun (left)
and cinematographer Victoria Sendra (right)

A note of thanks.

Our success is possible because of the generous support of our donors, the wisdom of our advisors, the dedication of our staff and our community, and the commitment of our leadership at Barnard. We remain thankful to our founding donors, Francene Sussner Rodgers '67, Constance Hess Williams '66, and Lucille Zanghi and James Dow P'10, who enabled us to start the Center, to Amy Crate '94, P'24, P'27 and Darrell Crate P'24, P'27 who enabled us to move into our next chapter, and to Constance Hess Williams '66 for her decision in 2011 to endow the Directorship, along with our active and dedicated Leadership Council, co-chaired by Claire Newman and Rochelle Cooper '84, P'12.

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Special thanks to Jennifer Rosales, VP for
Engaged Learning and Chief Diversity Officer,
for being among Athena's greatest champions.

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Thanks to our friends at House of
Kajaana, Sabah Ashraf '96 and
Athena alum Lili Cohen '19, for
keeping our freezer stocked with
delicious Kajaana meals for our busy
students!