

Who Is Claire Shipman, the New Interim President of Columbia?

The former television journalist and co-chair of the university's board of trustees takes the helm at a time of significant peril for the institution.



Claire Shipman, a Columbia graduate, will need to appease federal demands while dealing with a robust student protest movement and a strong-willed faculty. Jose Luis Magana/Associated Press

By [Sharon Otterman](#) and [Maia Coleman](#) March 29, 2025

On Capitol Hill last April, Claire Shipman, then a co-chair of Columbia University's board of trustees, [testified](#) that she agreed there was a “moral crisis on our campus,” with students and faculty members acting in unacceptable ways that threatened Jewish and Israeli students.

“I can tell you plainly that I am not satisfied with where Columbia is at this moment,” she said at a hearing on campus antisemitism.

Now, she will have even more of an opportunity to address the situation. On Friday, Ms. Shipman, 62, an author and former television journalist, was [elevated](#) to become Columbia's interim president, remaining in the role until a search for a permanent president is completed.

Ms. Shipman is taking the helm at a time of significant peril for the 271-year-old institution. The Trump administration has cut [\\$400 million](#) in federal research grants to Columbia,

mostly in the health sciences, because of what it described as the school's failure to protect Jewish students from harassment. To get the money back, the White House is demanding a series of [reforms](#) from Columbia, including a ban on masks that are intended to conceal identity, stricter rules about where and when protests can take place and outside oversight of the university's Middle Eastern studies department.

Federal officers from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency have detained or attempted to detain several current or former Columbia students in recent weeks, including Mahmoud Khalil, a leader of the school's pro-Palestinian movement who holds a green card and is married to a U.S. citizen.

Katrina Armstrong, who stepped down as the university's interim president on Friday, had pledged to meet the Trump administration's conditions for a return of the funding. But the [written promises](#) Columbia made, while far-reaching, did not go as far as the government's demands, and Dr. Armstrong faced criticism last week for [appearing to downplay](#) the changes at a faculty meeting, a transcript of which was leaked to the news media.

Ms. Shipman will face the same complicated balancing act, as she tries to appease federal demands while dealing with a robust student protest movement and a strong-willed faculty dedicated to protecting its academic freedom against Washington interference.

Victor Mendelson, a member of the Columbia board of trustees, said by email on Saturday that the board was "absolutely, fully behind Claire in her new role."

"Claire is a special person who is able to bring people together and bridge divides," Mr. Mendelson said. "She is patient and understanding. Working with her has been one of the highlights of my board service, and I am thrilled she is serving as our acting president."

On campus, however, the news of Ms. Armstrong's sudden departure, effective immediately, led to swirling speculation about why it had happened so suddenly, as well as questions about why a member of the board had been made the interim president, rather than a faculty member or seasoned administrator.

"It is a matter of concern that, like President Shafik, this is a person whose professional career has not been made in the academy," said Michael Thaddeus, a mathematician at Columbia, referring to Nemat Shafik, the former president who resigned last August. "Claire Shipman really hasn't been full time in a university since she graduated from Columbia."

On the other hand, he said, this was an acting position that faculty members presume “is not going to last that long.” He said he hoped the presidential search committee consulted with faculty members and students as it sought the right person for the permanent post.

Ms. Shipman grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and entered Columbia College as a sophomore. When she arrived in New York, she told Congress, she was “a full financial aid student with little sense about the school, the city or the world.”

Columbia changed that. She majored in Russian studies, graduating in 1986, as one of the first Columbia College classes to [include women](#). She went on to Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs to continue graduate studies in the field.

She got her first big break when she landed a six-month internship in CNN’s Moscow bureau just before the fall of the Soviet Union, [she told a Columbia alumni magazine](#) in a wide-ranging interview in 2002. From there, she moved steadily up the ranks, working in Moscow before moving to Washington to cover the Clinton White House for CNN and then NBC.

Bruce Conover, a former colleague of Ms. Shipman’s at CNN’s Moscow Bureau, described her as “steel under gentle.” Ms. Shipman, he said, distinguished herself in the bureau early on as an intelligent and empathetic co-worker and journalist driven equally by ambition and compassion.

“She was very good about speaking to people on their level about what concerned them, in a way that I think made themselves feel verified, like they had something valid to share,” Mr. Conover said.

In the Middle East on assignment, he said, Ms. Shipman showed a sensitivity to complicated issues and an understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he felt would help in her new role.

“I think she will desperately seek a strategy that preserves the funding for research and the funding that allows the school to go forward and continue its traditions,” while balancing the importance of free speech, he said.

Ms. Shipman moved to ABC in about 2001, where she became a correspondent and a “Good Morning America” contributor. In the late 1990s, according to the alumni magazine, she married Jay Carney, who served as President Barack Obama’s press secretary from 2011 to 2014. The couple, who are divorced, have two children, according to a Columbia spokeswoman.

Ms. Shipman joined the Columbia board of trustees in 2013, and became a co-chair in 2023. She now takes on what may well be one of the toughest jobs in academia, while Dr. Armstrong returns to her former post as head of the university's medical center.

"I assume this role with a clear understanding of the serious challenges before us," Ms. Shipman said in a statement Friday, "and a steadfast commitment to act with urgency, integrity, and work with our faculty to advance our mission, implement needed reforms, protect our students and uphold academic freedom and open inquiry."

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