



EXIT INTERVIEW

Dean Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH, has led Columbia Mailman School of Public Health to become one of the world's top institutions for public health education and science. Through 16 years, thousands of students, and one global pandemic, her leadership has ensured that students go out into the world prepared to innovate and take charge to address society's most persistent and urgent public health challenges. As she prepares to step down at the end of the 2024–2025 school year, Fried talks with alumna and Board of Advisors member **Perri Peltz, MPH '84**, about what's needed and what's next for public health.

Thank you, Dean Linda Fried, for your visionary leadership. Take us back to when you started. How did you see this school then?

The school that I had the privilege to join 16 years ago had amazing people and was ready to rise to a whole new level. There was deep commitment to the public and the public good, and enough expertise to cover the leading edge of so many issues. My role has been in part to better support people's success, to ensure the School has the institutional goals and capabilities and the bench staff to tackle the very complex issues that we were intent on tackling.

As somebody who had experience with the School back in 1984 when I was a master's student and then when I returned as a doctoral student, I've seen the evolution. How did you take on the enormity of what you have been able to accomplish?

I was excited to come to an institution of such deep commitment and to lead in building the fabric of an institution that could support its mission: to bring scientific knowledge to the problems that threaten people's health. And then to build the science, to understand how to keep people healthy. That commitment was there.

My approach to leadership is to help enable an institution to be great. It requires building the substance from the bottom up rather than the image from the top down, so that you can actually deliver on what the future needs.

When I met you, Linda, maybe 15 years ago. I remember thinking that you were looking at this school in a very big way. You spoke about systems. You used the word *interdisciplinary*. What were you thinking, and have you accomplished that?

It was clear to me that the challenges of the 21st Century are ones where no one discipline is sufficient to understand them or to solve them. The causes are complex and multifactorial. Let's take really any health problem, whether it's what causes a pandemic or what causes people to develop heart disease or stroke. Science has unveiled that there are many factors that have to come together in a perfect storm to end up with those outcomes, and you need multiple disciplines to understand the truth.

It's never one thing that causes ill health, and it's never one thing that creates health. You need to have multiple disciplines working together from different points of expertise to say, well, how do we solve this effectively? In 2008, it was clear to me that there was no academic institution that had yet taken those learnings about the necessity of interdisciplinary thinking and intentionally built the range of sciences needed to solve these challenges effectively. We had to figure that out. And we had to transform from very strong disciplinary expertise—not scuttle that, not throw it out, but expand capabilities—and unite disciplines to solve complex problems. My 16 years here has been dedicated to laying that foundation; to have successful interdisciplinary science be the norm. The great news is we have accomplished it.

When I walked out of that meeting, I thought to myself, doesn't she know that academia doesn't do this? Honestly, I didn't think that there was a chance that you could accomplish what you were talking about. Of course, at the time, I didn't know you. How is this school different now?

It looks very different. That's not all due to me. It is due to our ability to come together as an institution and ask: What will the future demand of a great school of public health, a great science institution, an educational institution, committed to building a better future of health? We interrogated that together and came to a shared agreement that interdisciplinary science and knowledge had to be at the core. That has required many levels of change. Over a number of years, we went through formal processes to identify the issues that we should confront that are threatening our health and decide whether they required interdisciplinary solutions, scientifically and educationally.

THE FRIED YEARS: HIGHLIGHTS

2008

Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH, becomes dean of the School. A national leader in the field of geriatric health and epidemiology, she is the first woman in the position.

The Biostatistics Epidemiology Summer Training Diversity Program (BEST) for students from underrepresented backgrounds begins. In subsequent years, it is joined by other "pathway" programs to bring historically marginalized groups into the public health field.

2009

A strategic planning process identifies critical issues for public health in the 21st century.

Dean Fried is instrumental in launching Columbia University's first global center in Europe.

2010

Professors Quarraisha Abdool Karim, MS '88, PhD, and Salim S. Abdool Karim, MS '88, MD, PhD, publish a study in the journal *Science* finding that tenofovir gel is effective in preventing HIV transmission in women.

2011

The School establishes the Climate and Health Program.

2012

The revamped MPH Core Curriculum debuts, providing a rigorous program of interdisciplinary training in public health science and leadership.

The Center for Injury Science and Prevention, a CDC-funded Injury Control Research Center, is founded.

Columbia Mailman School and the Columbia Journalism School take responsibility for leading Age Boom Academy, a summer boot camp for journalists on aging issues.

2013

The University creates the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center, an endowed, universitywide, interdisciplinary research and policy center housed within the School.



2014

Sidney and Helaine Lerner establish the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion and corresponding endowed professorship in public health promotion.

The Incarceration and Public Health Action Network is developed to examine mass incarceration through a public health lens and incorporate criminal justice reform into public health education.



The Master of Healthcare Administration (MHA), offered through the Department of Health Policy and Management, gives students intensive training in leadership and management along with a broad introduction to public health, health policy, and healthcare systems.

ICAP at Columbia begins providing technical assistance for the Population-based HIV Impact Assessment (PHIA) Project to capture the state of the epidemic in the most affected countries.

2015

President Barack Obama cites the School's research at a White House meeting to shine a light on the link between climate and health.

The first cohort of Tow Scholars is announced. Supported by the Tow Foundation, the program fosters research by mid-career faculty.

Researchers at the School's Center for Infection and Immunity (CII) report that chronic fatigue syndrome is a physical illness, rather than a psychological disorder.

The Symposium on Preventing Childhood Obesity brings together researchers across disciplines.

2016

An international roster of experts gathers in Shanghai to address aging in China and around the world at the Columbia-Fudan Global Summit on Aging and Health.

Fried receives the Inserm International Prize, a scientific award given each year by the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research, the French equivalent of the U.S. National Institutes of Health.



2017

The Global Consortium on Climate and Health Education (GCCHE), a network of health professions schools and programs, launches.

2018

The School partners with Barnard College to offer a 4+1 program that allows undergraduates to earn an MPH a year after they graduate with a BA. Similar programs follow with other schools.

David Rosner, PhD, MPH, and Gerald Markowitz, PhD, give testimony in a landmark case in which paint manufacturers are found responsible for lead contamination in California. Toxic Docs, a repository of documents related to toxic exposures, launches.

2019

The Yusuf Hamied Fellowship Program, supported by the celebrated Indian scientist and pioneering business leader, catalyzes collaborations between researchers at Columbia Mailman School and their counterparts in India.

2020

Experts from across the School pioneer testing techniques and therapies for COVID-19, conduct modeling to forecast spread, and offer technical assistance worldwide. Faculty and students support community awareness and vaccine programs.

Students, faculty, and staff create the FORWARD (Fighting Oppression, Racism and White Supremacy through Action, Research and Discourse) initiative, one in a series of efforts to promote inclusive and equitable education in the field of public health.

Here's a key example. In 2008, climate change and its effects on health rose in our analysis to one of the top issues that will threaten health in this century. We know that climate change is causing extremes of heat, changes in hurricanes, flooding, drought, a whole set of natural disasters, wildfires. It's causing food insecurity and water insecurity. And all of those are threatening human health and threatening human survival and creating, in many parts of the world, refugees. And I didn't even mention the rise in infectious diseases in areas that never saw them before, like malaria, because of a warming climate. There is no one discipline that can address all those consequences. All of these require teams of people handling these different problems.

Working together as teams, we went on to build the governance to support interdisciplinary work. Will faculty be promoted for interdisciplinary work? Will they have interdisciplinary centers to work in that will bring these teams together? We've built the governance to support success in interdisciplinary science. We have recruited 130 new faculty in my time as dean, in large part to bring the expertise to tackle the issues of our collective future.

In your letter to the School community sharing that you would be concluding your service as dean, you write, "We have accomplished so much together, but our ambitious community knows there is more to be done." What is on the horizon?

Public health was responsible for adding 25 of our increased 30 years of life expectancy over the last century. Now, public health needs to take the lead in ensuring those additional years are healthy. There is an opportunity for the United States to invest in a new vision of public health focused on healthy longevity for everyone. There are many dimensions where public health needs to rise and to redefine the role of the public health system, so as to deliver conditions that enable people in every community in this country to be healthy. And there are many other challenges. Why are cancers rising in young people? How do we eliminate the number four cause of death around the world, which is air pollution? Health is a human right. Public health has shown that prevention works. And it is public health's responsibility to deliver the vast majority of health to the public.

Is there anything else that keeps you up at night in terms of public health?

The threat of loneliness is a huge threat. It is a consequence of many forces which are new to human beings, like social media, disinformation and misinformation, the pandemic exacerbating disconnection from other human beings. Young people and old people, especially, feel isolated and lonely. And then on top of that, loneliness is shredding our ability to come together to solve issues that we can only solve together. If we want to solve loneliness, by definition, we need to do it together.

Drug addiction and substance use are other issues where we need collective action, both to care for people who are addicted, but also to tackle the factors that are driving people to addiction. No one approach can solve this alone.

As you are talking about things that have kept you up at night, I recall that at some of the deepest, darkest moments—the COVID-19 pandemic being one—you have seemed calm. You said to me at the time that this had to do with your deep faith in the School and your love of the School. What is it that you love about it?

I love walking in the door every morning. I am surrounded by people who are committed to creating knowledge as a basis for a better world and empowering all sectors of society to accomplish that. It's inspiring to be surrounded by people who are committed to the public good; who are spending their lives dedicated to improving well-being and elevating human society. How can that not be inspiring?

When I talk to people on your staff about what makes you such an incredible leader, it's not related to public health specifically; it's leadership skills. You have been a student of leadership. What have you learned?

MY COLLEAGUES AND I HAVE BEEN ABOUT CHANGE FOR THE GOOD SINCE I'VE BEEN AT THE SCHOOL, AND WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED TRANSFORMATION TOGETHER.

I was persuaded to study leadership out of necessity many years ago. I observed that principled and effective leadership matters. I was confronted by the need to see if there was a skill set I could learn because I'm a physician, I'm a scientist, but neither of those calling cards come with training in leadership skills.

What I've learned over the years is that there is a whole set of skills that can be applied at any stage of leadership, and that some of what you need to do is to create a vision of what the future demands—that is aspirational, and that, hopefully, will unite people and inspire them to work together. And then it's your responsibility as a leader to make that aspiration clear and to make it achievable and to make every person feel they can be part of it, and they won't fall off the boat that's going there.

What is next for Dean Linda Fried?

Well, I understand I've earned a sabbatical, which I will take. But I'm excited to come back to the faculty and continue to lead the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center, a university-wide center dedicated to the idea that we can create a third demographic dividend, where societies and people flourish because of longevity, not despite it.

What wonderful news that you will be returning. Linda, as we conclude is there one message that you would like to share with the Columbia community?

I'll give you two. One is that change is more than possible. People say that longstanding institutions cannot change. And particularly that universities don't change. I very proudly can say that my colleagues and I have been about change for the good since I've been at the School, and we have accomplished transformation together.

The other message is something I am obsessed with, which is that public health is an exemplar of public goods. For capitalism to survive there are essential components that we must make sure are strong because everyone gains from them and no one profits from them. Public health requires collective investment to prevent disease, disability, and injury—which accounts for seventy percent of our overall health. And when we make adequate investment in public health at the science level, at the practice and policy level, all people have the opportunity to flourish and all sectors of society do better.

We're going to end with a Linda Fried Fun Fact. I have learned that you have a black belt in Aikido. Has that training informed the way in which you work?

I trained in Aikido for many years; it's deeply part of who I am. Aikido is a nonviolent Japanese self-defense art in which you learn that you don't have to be big and muscular to lead. You can lead change, if attacked, by joining with the attacker and redirecting aggression toward a shared end while protecting the attacker from getting hurt. It's possible to do that in almost any situation, to turn situations of conflict to better ends and mutual benefit. And that is the foundation of how I think about leadership. ●

The School hosts the inaugural Data Science for Public Health Summit, convening public health leaders to consider the many dimensions of data science in public health.

Faculty, with researchers across the University, launch the Columbia Scientific Union for the Reduction of Gun Violence (SURGE).

2021

A team led by Dean Fried synthesizes evidence on the aging-related pathophysiology underpinning the clinical presentation of frailty. The findings appear in the inaugural issue of the journal *Nature Aging*.

CII launches the Global Alliance for Preventing Pandemics (GAPP) to establish sustainable infrastructure for infectious disease discovery, surveillance, diagnostics, and response through global capacity building.

2022

As the School celebrates its centennial, Dean Fried leads a visioning exercise to chart a course for the coming decades.

Dean Fried co-chairs a commission that publishes the National Academy of Medicine Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity.

2023

Dean Fried receives the Insignia of the Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur, France's highest order of merit, recognizing her positive impact on France and on a global level.



The School announces the recipients of eight Dean's Centennial Grand Challenges grants for interdisciplinary research projects that address some of the 21st century's biggest public health challenges.

The Food Systems and Public Health certificate program launches to train students in the role that food plays in public health.

Columbia Mailman ranks third in the nation for NIH Prime Awards to schools of public health, with a gain of 61 percent since 2018.

The School co-organizes the inaugural Global First Ladies Academy, hosting eight first ladies from African nations and U.S. first lady Dr. Jill Biden.



2024

The Columbia Mailman Center for Innovative Exposomics launches to bring sophisticated environmental analysis to open new avenues for prevention and treatments.

Professor Katherine Keyes, PhD '06, MPH '10, leads the newly created SPIRIT (Social Psychiatry: Innovation in Research, Implementation, and Training) initiative to catalyze collaboration to address the mental health crisis.