



Robert Carter for The Chronicle

Can Jennifer Mnookin Heal Columbia?

One of higher ed's most skilled negotiators arrives at one of its most fractured campuses.

From the Frying Pan Into the Fire



By [Francie Diep](#) and [Nell Gluckman](#)

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Several years ago, Lynn Vavreck needed advice on how to deal with a professional dilemma. She turned to Jennifer L. Mnookin. As they meandered through a farmer's market in Los Angeles's Westside, Vavreck, a political scientist at the University of California at Los Angeles, described her predicament to Mnookin, who was a faculty member in the law school.

"If you decide to take the practical solution, good for you. Then you get to move on. Everybody can put it in the rear view," Vavreck recalls Mnookin explaining. "But, if you decide that you can't do that and you need to stand on principle, good for you."

Vavreck had felt she was in an impossible tangle, but Mnookin was more positive: "This is win-win for you, and you get to make the choice."

It was a relief, Vavreck said: "She helped me see that it was going to be OK." Vavreck chose the practical path.

Some of higher education's hardest leadership questions require balancing the practical and the principled. Nowhere is that clearer than at Columbia University, where Mnookin will become president on July 1. Columbia was home to some of the tensest and most publicized clashes between pro- and anti-Israel activists in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023. Later, it [became the first target](#) in the federal government's [campaign](#) to overhaul prestigious universities, and the first to strike a deal with the Trump administration. Mnookin will be expected to pull the university out of one of the most turbulent periods in its 272-year history.

Admirers say she is the ideal person for the task. Many of those who watched Mnookin's administrative decision-making up close as she rose first to dean of UCLA's law school, then chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, describe her as a level-headed negotiator who listens to many sides, bridges divides, and comes to practical, workable solutions.

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But negotiations can look from the outside like "wheeling and dealing behind closed doors," as one Wisconsin faculty member put it. Some worried that she was willing to give too much away.

"I think of myself as a principled pragmatist," Mnookin said in an interview with *The Chronicle*. "There are core principles that inform my leadership. I deeply believe in academic freedom and freedom of expression, and in the need for universities to have appropriate authority over their own decision-making. I'm also a pragmatist, and I believe that it is in our interest to find ways to work constructively across our differences."

Columbia continues to struggle with the same questions that face the rest of the country's big research universities: What's the best way to respond to critics, including the federal government? What do you protect, and what do you concede?

"Our world, our academic world, needs Columbia to be successful," said Michael H. Schill, who considers Mnookin a close friend and who resigned as president of Northwestern University after the Trump administration froze its federal research funding over alleged antisemitism. If Mnookin can bring together a notoriously fractured campus, Schill said, Columbia can "model to the rest of the nation the value of the universities" — and prove the higher-ed critics wrong about the state of speech and community on campus.

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Mnookin learned about compromise young. Her father, Robert Mnookin, is a professor emeritus who specialized in negotiations and conflict resolution at Harvard Law School, though he refuses to take credit.

But, he conceded, “it is true that at our dinner table, we often talked about negotiation and conflict.”

They would talk about situations he was working on or that were in the news. “Jennifer was very good at probing to learn: What are the underlying interests of these people in conflict?” her father said.

He suspected, even when she was just three years old, that she would one day become an academic. “She just had that bent of mind.” But she did not go directly to graduate school after attending Harvard College. She traveled to Guatemala to learn Spanish, then trekked across Mexico with a friend.

She didn't stray from the academy for long, though. After attending Yale Law School, and simultaneously earning a Ph.D. in the history and social study of science and technology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mnookin became an expert on how science is used in the legal system. Her first faculty position was at the University of Virginia School of Law.

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In 2005, she was recruited to UCLA as a star faculty member, said Gene Block, who was provost at the University of Virginia before serving as UCLA's chancellor. It seemed clear that she aspired to higher leadership within the university. “She was always preparing herself,” Block said, by seeking positions where she could learn more about campuswide issues. She held vice-dean positions before becoming dean of the law school in 2015.

In that role, she was part of several councils of deans advising the provost, Scott Waugh, and ultimately Block. “She gave good advice,” Waugh said.

When he stepped down as provost and executive vice chancellor in 2019, Mnookin sought the job but lost to a candidate who had recent experience outside of the University of California system. She continued as dean for three more years before departing to be chancellor of UW-Madison. There, her reputation for negotiation and compromise was put to the test.

The Republican-dominated Legislature in Wisconsin met Mnookin with immediate skepticism. Within hours of learning of her selection — a Californian with degrees from Harvard and Yale — legislators [were calling her](#) a “woke radical” and “a ridiculous choice.” Robin Vos, speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly, [called](#) her a “blatant partisan selection” and said the board should reconsider.

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But Mnookin showed a commitment to pluralism and free speech that predated the criticism colleges faced after October 7. Shortly after she took office, for example, she [told student journalists](#) that “one person's hate speech is another person's idea” and that the university was trying to teach students that they could learn from those with whom they disagreed.

Then the crises came on thick and fast. A video went viral in 2023, showing a UW-Madison student yelling racist slurs and saying she wanted Black people to pick cotton until they died.

Also that year, the Legislature held up funding across the Universities of Wisconsin system, demanding that it cut spending on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. In 2024, anti-Israel protesters built an encampment on campus. The following year state lawmakers [mandated minimum teaching loads](#) and reorganized general-education courses across the system.

The viral video had prompted hundreds of students to [stage a sit-in](#) outside of Mnookin's office and thousands of people to sign a [petition](#) calling for the subject of the video to be expelled. But Mnookin demurred. As a public institution, UW-Madison was bound by "numerous legal constraints," [she wrote in a letter](#) to student protesters. (A [separate university statement](#) said UW-Madison couldn't take action against students and employees for social-media posts that didn't break the law.) She condemned racism and the sentiments expressed in the video. "You belong here and I want you to know that we hear you," she wrote.

"A lot of students at the time were disappointed and really looking for something more," said Landis Varughese, then a freshman, who would later become student-body president. Qaitlyn Ross became president of a student group, the Blk Pwr Coalition, that formed to respond to the controversy. In her view Mnookin made no progress on [recommendations](#) for improving Black students' experience at UW-Madison that were produced in the wake of the video and protests.

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Mnookin said in an interview with *The Chronicle* that creating a "welcoming and inclusive and respectful" campus "are huge and important goals, but we also have to recognize that the First Amendment protects a good deal of speech, even when it isn't particularly welcoming and inclusive."

During Varughese's time at UW-Madison he often heard the phrase "dialogue through difference" from campus leaders. But "there are some things you can't dialogue through," he said. "There are also things you can't compromise on. If you have issues with belonging on campus, with racism on campus, that's not something you should be willing to compromise on."

Mnookin agreed that it's fair to ask for some ground rules to make dialogue across difference work. "The core dignity of all participants might not be a bad thing to start with," she said, "but we need to be open to the idea that we should bring curiosity to conversations with each other before judgment, and that we most often have something to learn from those who see the world differently from us."

The first budget season of Mnookin's tenure threw her into dialogue with legislators. During the summer and fall of 2023, they [rejected funding proposals](#) for buildings and [withheld pay raises](#) across the system, conditioning the latter on the universities trimming \$32 million from what lawmakers called DEI spending. Ultimately, the Legislature and the system came to an [agreement](#). The system would freeze its total number of jobs through 2026, with exceptions including faculty, and it would convert at least a third of campus "DEI" staff into general student-success positions. UW-Madison would halt a program aimed at recruiting underrepresented minority faculty. It would raise money for an endowed chair "to focus on conservative political thought." (The university is still raising funds for that role.)

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In return, the Legislature would fund the pay raises, a new engineering building at the Madison campus, and other projects.

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Mnookin worked with Jay O. Rothman, then the president of the Universities of Wisconsin system, to edit potential terms in the deal and respond to drafts sent by Vos's office, according to documents [obtained by The Chronicle](#) and [other news outlets](#). (Vos did not respond to a request for an interview.)

"Did this all work for you?" Rothman texted Mnookin, five days before the final deal became public. "I will turn something in the morning."

"Yes but I don't want to give up on the additional capital projects without a fight," Mnookin replied.

"Agreed," Rothman wrote.

Compared with a draft deal dated late November 2023, the final version retained all the same capital projects and added funds for utility projects.

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The day the deal became public, Mnookin acknowledged that many would be disappointed. But she insisted in a [message](#) to the Madison campus that the university could still uphold its "core value of diversity" and its "commitment to belonging for all our students."

Taylor Odle, an assistant professor at UW-Madison who studies education policy, regards Rothman and Mnookin as successful advocates to skeptical lawmakers, pointing to the state's 2025-27 budget, which includes the [largest increase in funding](#) that the system has seen in more than 20 years.

Others decried sacrificing DEI for dollars. The loss of identity-specific resources signaled to students and faculty members that "your unique circumstances, that you and your community face, are no longer valuable enough to defend," said one faculty member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he feared professional repercussions. "We could have done without another building for several more years. We could have done without the 2-percent raise for a couple more years. We could have done without and still stood for something," he said.

Less than a year later, Mnookin would play an even more central role in brokering an accord between deeply opposed parties.

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Advocates for divestment from Israel set up tents on the Madison campus's Library Mall in late April 2024. Early on May 1, with Mnookin's [authorization](#), campus police and other law-enforcement officers cleared the encampment and arrested [more than 30 protesters](#), drawing a [rebuke](#) from the Faculty Senate. But the protesters quickly regrouped and erected the encampment again. Then began just over a week of intense negotiation that threatened to extend into graduation weekend.

Mnookin and the demonstrators eventually [reached an agreement](#), just hours before the start of commencement. Administrators would facilitate talks between student organizers and the University of Wisconsin Foundation, which manages the endowment. The students cleared their tents.

In the aftermath, Mnookin said: "There were some who said if somebody said something racist, you'd take a very different kind of action." She pointed out that she and her administration had

stayed “true to our meta commitments to protect free speech” in both their responses to the student whose racist video went viral and the students protesting Israel. Activists had been [given the option](#) to continue their demonstration without tents, which are [prohibited by state law](#).

Mnookin won the respect of some of the people she was at odds with during the encampment. Samer Alatout, a professor of sociology and one of the protesters who had been arrested, was part of several conversations with the chancellor. He did not always agree with the statements she put out, nor did he approve of her decision to call the police. But he [told *The Chronicle*](#) in January that he found her to be someone who would listen and incorporate what he told her into her thinking.

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Mnookin’s style of conversation and compromise could leave some feeling left out. Negotiators often work behind closed doors, hashing it out with a few key people, while the public is left to wait for smoke signals. Speaking of how Mnookin implemented the Legislature’s latest budget, Karl Broman, president of UW-Madison’s American Association of University Professors chapter, said: “The handling of that has been entirely behind the scenes, in silence, basically because it’s more important to not upset the Legislature than it is to let faculty understand what’s going on.”

Mnookin defended her approach. “Making good decisions is a blend of having some transparent spaces and also more confidential spaces,” she said. “There was meaningful engagement with parts of communities about all” the tough decisions she made at Wisconsin, she said: “But you’re not going to reach an agreement on contested issues with the Legislature, in polarized times, working jointly with system administration and campus and leadership, through town halls.”

She seemed able to connect with another important constituency. Timothy Nixon, a regent for the Universities of Wisconsin system, recalled a luncheon of about 300 VIP donors during which Mnookin had to take questions. It was sometime after the Gaza protests, and she was asked about her handling of them.

Nixon’s heart sank at the question, but Mnookin calmly walked the audience through how she approached the dilemma, he recalled. She talked about how people had a right to free speech, but not to break the law, and that it’s also important to understand that there are strongly felt, opposing views, which the community must find ways of engaging.

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By the time she was finished, Nixon said, “they were eating out of her hand.”

Mnookin’s skill with those who support the university is borne out in the numbers. In its latest [publicly available](#) financial statement, UW-Madison reported getting \$536 million in state appropriations, 15 percent more than it had in the fiscal year ending in June 2022, two months before Mnookin became chancellor. And it was not just state funding. Federal grants and contracts were up 44 percent. Gifts were up 48 percent.

She also won over one important critic. After the news broke that she would leave for Columbia, Vos, the State Assembly speaker, [issued a statement](#) thanking her for her service and praising her “commitment to the students” and “bringing more free speech to campus and closing its division of DEI.” He wrote: “I know that Columbia University will be in great hands with her at the helm.”

At Columbia, Mnookin will be stepping into the epicenter of the earthquake that has rocked higher education for the last several years. The protests there and Columbia's handling of them ultimately helped end the presidency of Nemat (Minouche) Shafik, who was replaced by an interim president, Katrina Armstrong, and then an acting president, Claire Shipman.

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Less than two months after Donald Trump became president last year, his administration cut off hundreds of millions in federal research spending at Columbia and demanded the university discipline protesters, ban masks, and place its department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African studies under "[academic receivership](#)." Federal immigration agents pulled one of the student organizers, Mahmoud Khalil, out of his Columbia apartment building without a warrant and detained him for months. He still faces the threat of deportation.

Columbia also became the first university to sign a deal with the Trump administration, agreeing to make some changes and to pay more than \$200 million to restore its research funding. The deal disgusted many observers, who saw the university as caving in to authoritarian pressure. Shipman [said](#) at the time that the agreement protected Columbia's values and allowed it to return to its mission with its ability to apply for billions in federal grants restored.

Columbia's trustees are now hoping that the dust has settled and the university can turn to other problems facing the sector: how to deal with AI, how to bring down costs for students, how to restore public trust in its work. But they have picked someone who they believe can handle the pressure should there be aftershocks.

In interviews with *The Chronicle*, Jeh Johnson and David Greenwald, co-chairs of Columbia's Board of Trustees, both said they admired how Mnookin won bipartisan support in Wisconsin's famously head-spinning political landscape, where the Legislature is dominated by Republicans but the governor is a Democrat. Greenwald added that Mnookin's handling of the pro-Palestinian protests, particularly how she enforced the terms of the deal she struck with students, helped her get the job at Columbia.

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The trustees also seemed to simply like her personality.

"She's really bright without being stuffy," Duchesne Drew, another trustee, said. "I think that will play really well in a lot of rooms."

Some of those rooms will include presidents of the country's other most selective and wealthiest universities. Those leaders have pursued different ways to deal with the fraught politics of this moment. On one end of the spectrum are presidents like Michael S. Roth of Wesleyan University, who has written of the need to fight the Trump administration's demand that universities toe its ideological line. On the other end are leaders like [Sian Beilock](#) of Dartmouth College, who agree with some of the sector's critics that higher education has lost its way.

Both appeared in a three-person [interview](#) in *The New York Times* last fall representing opposing points of view. The third person helped find common ground. It was Jennifer Mnookin.

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Correction (June 29, 2026, 10:00 a.m.): A previous version of this article misidentified Wesleyan University as a college. It has been updated.



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