Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education

Yale University

APRIL 10, 2026

Letter of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education
Yale University

April 10, 2026

To President McInnis:

In April 2025, you asked our committee to examine the problem of declining trust in higher education. Your charge emphasized the need to engage a variety of perspectives, both within the university and beyond. While you specified a few important issues, such as the problem of self-censorship on campus, you afforded our committee a broad mandate to conduct our work as we saw fit. We now submit this report of our deliberations and recommendations.

We undertook this task at a difficult moment for higher education in the United States. You encouraged us to take the long view. As you noted, the problem of declining trust did not emerge out of nowhere over the past few months or years. Nor is it a challenge that will be met through short-term solutions. We welcomed your call to think big, tell the truth, and entertain controversial ideas.

Our research took us in many directions. We discussed tuition prices and admissions policy, political bias on campus and technology in the classroom, self-censorship and university governance and grade inflation. We examined what other universities were doing and tried to figure out how Yale measures up. Our research engaged issues of public trust—what the university looks like from the outside in—but also complementary issues of trust within the university itself.

We believe the issue of declining trust is real, urgent, and must be addressed. We focused our recommendations on Yale, but we hope they may prove useful to others in higher education as well.

Our committee's work brought us face to face with some of higher education's greatest challenges and blind spots. At the same time, we were heartened by the widespread enthusiasm for what colleges and universities do, and what they can yet be.

We submit this report and its recommendations unanimously.

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Report of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education
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1. Trust in Higher Education

Universities exist to preserve, create, and share knowledge. In one form or another, Yale has affirmed this mission for centuries. Staying true to that fundamental purpose, while remaining open to productive change, will be essential for building public trust in the years ahead.

Just a decade ago, 57 percent of Americans expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education. By 2024, that number had dropped to a historic low of 36 percent. While trust improved slightly in 2025, seventy percent of Americans still say that higher education is heading in the wrong direction.[1] It is the purpose of this report to explain why that happened, to assess the current situation, and to chart a path forward.

Our committee identified three immediate factors behind the rise of public distrust. The first involves the soaring price of higher education in the United States, along with the perception that college, graduate, and professional school are no longer worth the money and sacrifice they demand. The second focuses on the college admissions system—specifically, the question of who gets in and why. The third includes an array of issues about what is said and taught on university campuses, including matters of free speech, political bias, and self-censorship. We also found important problems related to trust within the university itself, including concerns that grade inflation, new technologies, and bureaucratic expansion have undermined the university's academic mission.

The range of topics revealed another challenge related to declining trust: widespread uncertainty about the fundamental purpose and mission of higher education. Trust is earned by doing what you say you're going to do—and, ideally, doing it well. In recent years, however, universities have been expected to be all things to all people: selective but inclusive, affordable but luxurious, meritocratic but equitable. Rather than build public support, this diffusion of purpose has contributed to distrust. Without a clear mission and purpose, it becomes difficult to judge whether colleges and universities are living up to their fundamental commitments.

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[1] Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low," Gallup, July 16, 2025; Kim Parker, "Growing share of Americans say the U.S. higher education system is headed in the wrong direction," Pew Research Center, October 15, 2025.

In itself, the problem of declining trust is not unique to higher education. Since the 1970s, Americans have grown increasingly mistrustful of nearly all civic institutions, including the media, the federal government, and the nation's major corporations and businesses.[2] Higher education, however, has special reason to be concerned. Over the past decade, trust in higher education has declined faster than in other institutions and sectors.[3] At the same time, public trust is particularly important for higher education to succeed. Whether or not a diploma has enduring value depends on what it signifies: personal effort, professional skill, intelligence, knowledge, expertise. If the public ceases to believe that colleges and universities are fostering such qualities, support for higher education will necessarily suffer.

Wealthy selective private universities such as Yale make up only a small fraction of the higher-education ecosystem, though they often attract outsize attention. In its annual lists of the nation's "best" schools, *U.S. News & World Report* tends to rank such universities at the top.[4] Surveys of public trust flip that hierarchy. According to public opinion polls, community colleges are the most trusted part of higher education, while public universities generally outrank private ones.[5] No sector of higher education faces greater public skepticism than the Ivy League.[6]

The data also suggests that Americans have great ambitions for their higher education system. Political scientist Ken Goldstein, who conducts public opinion research for the Association of American Universities, concludes that "the story told in these surveys is not one of rejection, but of expectation." On the whole, Americans "want universities to succeed"—but only "on terms that feel fair, affordable, and aligned with public purpose."[7]

2. The Committee's Work

Our committee's charge asked us to consider the problem of trust in higher education from many perspectives. The openness of that charge raised a challenge: What were the proper boundaries for an inquiry that might encompass just about everything in higher education? We embraced the expansive mandate but also recognized the need for action sooner rather than later. In all, our committee's work lasted a year.

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[2] Jeffrey M. Jones, "Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low," Gallup, July 5, 2022.

[3] "Confidence in Institutions," Gallup, accessed March 28, 2026.

[4] "Best National Universities Rankings," *U.S. News & World Report*, 2026, accessed March 28, 2026.

[5] Jones, "U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low."

[6] Ken Goldstein, "Public opinion briefing" (March 2025 national study), Association of American Universities, presentation, July 8, 2025.

[7] Ken Goldstein to the Committee on Trust in Higher Education, memorandum, November 30, 2025.

The committee consisted of ten members of the Yale faculty—five from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, five from Yale's professional schools—representing fields including astrophysics, business, communications, economics, history, law, literature, medical sciences, public health, and sociology. We approached our work as both citizens and scholars. We took seriously the charge to listen and not just talk. We were also acutely aware that the protections of tenure gave us both the ability and the obligation to speak frankly.

To begin, the committee opened an online public comment page and reviewed the initial responses. Some early comments questioned whether a group composed of tenured Yale faculty would be an effective vehicle for studying trust in higher education, or whether such a committee would be too immersed in the culture of academia to see beyond it. We took this as a reminder that we, too, faced some mistrust—that we were living as well as studying the trust problem. That recognition redoubled our commitment to reach out as widely as possible, engage in self-criticism, and approach our work with humility.

Our subsequent inquiry had three main dimensions. First, we grounded ourselves in the scholarly and policy literature, compiling an extensive bibliography and reviewing current polling data and news coverage from a range of political perspectives (see Selected Bibliography). Second, we looked inward, consulting with dozens of Yale stakeholder groups—including university leaders, students, staff, faculty, alumni, and local community members—and holding listening sessions throughout the campus. Third, we looked outward, speaking with journalists, activists, politicians, and critics, many of whom were unsparing in their views of higher education, as well as with organizations devoted to higher education broadly, including the Association of American Universities, Heterodox Academy, and the American Association of University Professors. We also consulted with leaders and committees from peer institutions engaged in similar processes of self-reflection.

To share our work with the campus as it developed, we launched a public event series on "The Future of Higher Education," bringing a range of visiting speakers to Yale, and sponsored an undergraduate seminar examining the history of higher education through the lens of trust.[8] Many other campus groups were engaged in related conversations during this period, and committee members participated actively in their events. An overview of individuals consulted, organizations engaged, and events organized and attended appears in the Appendix.

We encountered a wide range of opinion. At one extreme were those who scoffed at the possibility that the university was capable of genuine self-scrutiny. At the other were those who

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[8] Lisa Prevost, "Committee on Trust in Higher Ed launches speaker series," *YaleNews*, October 6, 2025; Leo Nyberg, "History department offering course on trust in higher education," *Yale Daily News*, October 27, 2025.

saw no need for change at all. Most fell somewhere in between, frustrated by aspects of the status quo but genuinely eager to improve higher education. We were struck, throughout, by the creativity and hopefulness with which so many of our interlocutors approached these challenges. This report would not have been possible without them.

3. History and Context

Universities play a distinct role in a modern democratic society. They exist not only to educate students and preserve cultural heritage, but also to push the frontiers of knowledge. Fulfilling that mission requires "the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable," as the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, chaired by historian C. Vann Woodward, noted half a century ago.[9] Institutions of higher education have not always lived up to that mission, either now or in the past. But the ideal remains. At their best, the nation's campuses provide a unique setting where vital ideas, experiments, and discoveries can be nurtured, tested through research and criticism, and communicated by faculty and students alike.

Some aspects of the campus setting, such as faculty tenure or shared university governance, can seem outdated, inefficient, or strange by 21st-century standards. But those structures exist for a reason: The best teaching and research requires the freedom to think creatively, make mistakes, and explore fields of inquiry that may not yield immediate practical results. In that sense, universities are designed to stand at a certain distance from the rest of society: deliberately shielded from commercial and political pressures, and charged with exercising a protected autonomy. The guiding idea is that the public will benefit, in the end, from the sum total of knowledge produced.

At the same time, universities are unavoidably embedded in the society that created and supports them. They must serve the needs of faculty, administrators, and students, but also those of the public at large. The nation's colleges and universities cannot succeed without a widely shared belief in the value of the education they provide and the legitimacy of the knowledge they create. A healthy campus culture requires good-faith engagement with public concerns, and curiosity rather than disdain in the face of criticism.

Striking the right balance between these imperatives is crucial for addressing the problem of declining public trust. By definition, trust is relational. It requires that all parties agree broadly

[9] C. Vann Woodward, chair, *Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale* (Yale University, Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, December 23, 1974).

about values, goals, and methods. Recent decades have produced a wide gap between what the public wants from its institutions of higher education and what those institutions appear to deliver. That challenge, however, is hardly unique to the current era. Since their inception, American colleges and universities have had an obligation to explain why they deserve the public's trust, and then to live up to the trust afforded them.

Yale was founded in 1701 to educate students "for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State."[10] Like most colleges at the time, it was then a small, private, and religious institution. Over the next three centuries, higher education in the United States was transformed by the founding of large public land-grant institutions, by the rise of the research university with an emphasis on graduate study and professional training, by the creation of community colleges, and by a dramatic expansion in both the size and nature of the nation's student body.

Central to the modern university is the principle of academic freedom, which aims to ensure that scholarly research and teaching can be conducted without external pressure or impediment. More than a century ago, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) described the emerging modern campus as "an intellectual experiment station, where new ideas may germinate and where their fruit… may be allowed to ripen."[11] It also reminded the nation's professors of the obligation to govern themselves responsibly and thoughtfully, in accord with academic principles but also in dialogue with the society around them. "If this profession should prove itself unwilling," the AAUP wrote, "it is certain that the task will be performed by others."[12]

Throughout this history, higher education encountered many critics. As the historian Richard Hofstadter noted, anti-intellectualism and suspicion of expertise have a long lineage in the United States.[13] The early 20th century also saw growing tensions over the relationship between elite universities and the egalitarian impulses of a modern democracy. Events at home and abroad fueled these tensions. During the 1920s, amid a wave of nativist and antisemitic sentiment, Yale, like other Ivy League institutions, sought to exclude the growing numbers of qualified Jewish applicants. The result was an admissions review that included assessments of an applicant's "personality and character"—subjective criteria through which the number of Jewish students

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[10] Colony of Connecticut General Court, "Act for Liberty to Erect a Collegiate School (1701)," in *The Yale Corporation: Charter and Legislation*. Printed for the President and Fellows (Yale University, 1976).
[11] American Association of University Professors (AAUP), "General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 1, no. 1 (December 31, 1915): 32.
[12] AAUP, "General report," 34.
[13] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Knopf Doubleday, 1963).

could be restricted.[14] The Jewish quota system collapsed during the postwar years, but the dilemmas it introduced have remained to this day: How, if at all, should university admissions reflect or confront the priorities and demographics of the broader society?

The history of academic freedom is also, in part, a history of political pressure. During World War I government demands for "100-percent Americanism" ran headlong into conflict with professors who opposed the war; firings, resignations, and controversies ensued. Three decades later, the anticommunist Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s again put pressure on academic freedom, as hundreds of faculty across the country came under investigation for their political views. In the 1960s and 1970s, American campuses became hubs of political activism, as students and faculty organized protests and teach-ins around issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War.

Among the most important changes of the postwar years was the rise of federal funding for scientific research. The "Cold War university" model produced a boom in scientific productivity, with U.S. science and technology soon unrivaled throughout the world. But, as Yale president A. Whitney Griswold noted during the 1950s, there were reasons for concern about what accepting federal money might mean for the university's autonomy.[15] There was no going back, however. The federal government continued to enlist universities in the national scientific mission and became the most important source of funding for scientific research at universities nationwide.[16]

Schools such as Yale changed in other significant ways during those years—for instance, by admitting women and racial minorities who had largely been excluded from the college by policy or practice. As this history suggests, colleges and universities are not meant to be stagnant institutions, looking only to preserve what already exists. They are designed to change in ways consistent with their fundamental academic mission.

4. Cost

The committee identified several areas where the gap between public expectation and institutional practice has grown the widest. The one most dominant and visible to the American public is cost.

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[14] Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 115.
[15] Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (Yale University Press, 1974), 435.
[16] Daniel Lee Kleinman, *Politics on the Endless Frontier: Postwar Research Policy in the United States* (Duke University Press, 1995).

Asked by the Association of American Universities in 2025 to rank the reasons why higher education might need to change its ways, the top choice by far was that "universities are simply too expensive."[17] On this issue, there is little divide between Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, those attending public and private universities. Nearly everyone agrees that the cost of higher education is too high. Rising tuition rates bear out this complaint. Over the past three decades, the average sticker price of undergraduate tuition at American colleges and universities, adjusted for inflation, has more than doubled.[18]

Families want to know why college costs so much and why costs keep rising. Economists have identified a variety of structural factors, including the labor-intensive nature of education, the need for competitive salaries to attract skilled professionals, and the flow of federal student aid. In public discourse, the most common critiques point to administrative bloat, spending on buildings, and the "corporatization" of the university. Opinion polls show widespread suspicion that colleges and universities, like other businesses, are primarily out to make a profit—though most are, legally speaking, not-for-profit institutions.[19]

A notable divide exists between public perceptions of ever more out-of-reach tuition prices and what many students pay, especially at a school like Yale. In recent decades, American universities have adopted a "high tuition-high aid" model, in which the tuition sticker price bears less and less relation to the actual cost for many individual students. This system has lowered the expense of college for individual students and families, which has not risen as much as the headlines suggest. But it has had a disastrous impact on public trust. By its nature, the system is complicated, unpredictable, secretive, and highly variable. These factors tend to reduce trust rather than increase it.

Measured by sticker price, Yale is one of the most expensive schools in the country. In 1993–1994, Yale College tuition was $18,630, or about $42,000 in today's dollars.[20] This year (2025–2026), tuition is $69,900. Yale estimates the full cost of attendance for the year at $94,425 plus travel expenses, in a nation where the median income for a family of four is just

[17] Goldstein, memorandum, 2.

[18] Adam Looney, *How much does college cost, and how does it relate to student borrowing? Tuition growth and borrowing over the past 30 years* (Brookings, July 31, 2024), 3.

[19] Ken Goldstein, "Public opinion briefing" (January 2024 national study), Association of American Universities, presentation, July 8, 2025.

[20] Yale Office of Institutional Research, *Factsheet* (1995–1996).

under $84,000.[21] Asked in a national poll to reflect on fifteen phrases that might describe Yale, nearly everyone—a full 86 percent—agreed that "too expensive" belonged at the top.[22]

The high cost of attendance seems even more astonishing when the growth of the university's endowment is taken into account: from $4 billion in 1995 (about $8.5 billion today) to a historic peak of more than $44 billion in 2025.[23] If Yale and its peer institutions are getting so much richer, why are they charging more?

The surprising news is that they are not, at least not in the ways that reports of annual tuition hikes might suggest. Under the high tuition-high aid model, Yale and its peer institutions have raised undergraduate tuition each year while increasingly subsidizing the cost of attendance for low-income and middle-class students. Today, approximately one in five undergraduate students attends Yale on a full ride, paying nothing for four years of education, including tuition, room and board, travel, books, and personal expenses.[24] More than 55 percent of undergraduates receive some level of need-based aid, and almost 90 percent graduate with no student loan debt. Beginning with the 2026–27 academic year, all families with incomes under $200,000 will qualify for free tuition, and those under $100,000 will have all billed expenses (tuition, housing, and food) fully covered.[25]

In that sense, the high tuition-high aid model has done what it was designed to do: make a college like Yale accessible to a wide array of students, from a range of incomes and backgrounds. From the perspective of building public trust, though, it would be hard to design a more ineffective system. The tuition sticker price may now be a fiction for many students, but it is the first thing most families see when they contemplate paying for college. The process of applying for aid is laborious, frustrating, and unpredictable. Indeed, many families do not believe such aid exists. According to a 2023 survey by the AAU, nearly half of Americans believe that colleges and universities demand the same payments from all students, regardless of income.[26]

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[21] "Yale University Undergraduate Financial Aid," Yale University, accessed January 12, 2026, https://web.archive.org/web/20251115204347/https://finaid.yale.edu/coa; Michael D. King, "No Significant Change in Estimated U.S. Median Household Income" (U.S. Census Bureau, September 9, 2025).

[22] Ken Goldstein, "Yale public opinion studies: September 2025 national, state, and local studies," presentation, November 19, 2025.

[23] Yale University Office of Institutional Research, "Endowment Summary (W087)," last updated March 3, 2026.

[24] "Yale announces 2025-26 term bill, reaffirms financial aid commitments," *YaleNews*, February 10, 2025.

[25] "Affordability," Yale University Undergraduate Admissions, accessed April 1, 2026, https://perma.cc/5KLM-P73H; "Yale to offer free tuition to families with incomes below $200,000," *YaleNews*, January 27, 2026.

[26] Association of American Universities, "2023 Survey Result on Tuition at Colleges and Universities," April 2023.

While correcting miscommunication may help to improve public trust, the greater issue remains: Higher education still costs too much. For too many Americans, paying for college or graduate education means taking on serious debt, which millions of borrowers struggle to repay. According to the U.S. Department of Education, almost a quarter of all Americans with federal student loans are currently in default, the highest rate since the federal government began keeping track.[27] The debt crisis also reflects a deeper problem of value. For many students, the economic return on higher education has become uncertain at best. When borrowers default, this is often less a story of personal failure than an indictment of an educational system that recruits students and encourages borrowing with promises of secure employment, but too often fails to deliver.

5. Undergraduate Admissions

In 2026, Yale admitted 4.2 percent of applicants to the College.[28] Put another way: Yale College rejected nearly 96 percent of the students who applied. One response might be to increase the size of the undergraduate population—in other words, to admit more students. Even if Yale College doubled in size, however, the math would not change significantly.

The current admissions system is effective at yielding a class of talented students; it works well for those who get in. It is less effective at explaining why one applicant was chosen over another.

Yale and its peer research universities rely substantially on public resources through both tax status and federal funding. An Ivy League education also opens doors to prestigious careers and opportunities, including in government and politics. In most countries, this combination of public subsidy and high stakes would produce an admissions system built on transparent, rule-based criteria such as entrance examinations.

In the United States, the system evolved differently, especially at private universities. Selective undergraduate admissions are oriented toward constructing a class, using a mix of objective and subjective criteria designed to serve the institution's aims. At Yale, the foundation of the current system is often traced to a 1967 letter written by President Kingman Brewster. That letter argued that Yale should seek future leaders; that it should prioritize applicants whose capacities would let them benefit most from Yale's resources; that motivation and moral seriousness

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[27] "U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of the Treasury Announce Historic Federal Student Assistance Partnership," *U.S. Department of Education*, press release, March 19, 2026; Stacy Cowley, "Record Number of Student Loan Borrowers Are in Delinquency and Default," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2026.
[28] "Yale admits 2,328 applicants to Class of 2030," *YaleNews*, March 26, 2026.

deserve weight alongside ability; that variety in the class is an important goal; and that equality of opportunity for admission is essential.[29] These remain worthy principles.

But the holistic admissions process, however adeptly designed and applied, is subjective and hard to explain. The available evidence also suggests that it disproportionately benefits wealthy applicants. One widely cited paper finds that, conditional on SAT/ACT scores, applicants from families in the top 1 percent of the income distribution are substantially more likely to be admitted to highly selective private colleges than are middle- or upper-middle-income applicants with similar academic credentials.[30] The authors attribute roughly one-quarter of that effect to recruited athletics, roughly half to legacy status, and the remainder to other factors strongly correlated with family income.

Many surveys have testified to the unpopularity of preferences afforded to special categories of applicants.[31] In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* determined that colleges cannot use race as a factor in admissions decisions.[32] The major remaining categories associated with admission preferences are legacies (the children of alumni), varsity athletes, and the children of donors, faculty, and staff. Though less well-known than these other categories, men tend to receive preference in admission at many schools, now that women make up the majority of college applicants.[33]

Constructing a class will always involve judgment, and balancing across characteristics such as income distribution or regions of the country may be desirable. The question is whether that judgment can be exercised transparently and whether academic criteria remain visibly at the center. At Yale, the primacy of academic criteria should be non-negotiable. To be sure, assessing academic achievement can be difficult. Grading practices vary enormously across the country, and standardized testing is an imperfect measure of academic promise. Meanwhile, research

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[29] Kingman Brewster to John Muyskens, Jr., March 15, 1967, available at: “Historic Documents & Reference Material,” Yale University.

[30] Raj Chetty, David J. Deming, and John N. Friedman, “Diversifying Society’s Leaders? The Determinants and Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 141, no. 1 (October 30, 2025), 51–145.

[31] For instance, see: John Gramlich, “Americans and affirmative action: How the public sees the consideration of race in college admissions, hiring,” Pew Research Center, June 16, 2023; Justin McCarthy, “Post-Affirmative Action, Views on Admissions Differ by Race,” Gallup, January 16, 2024; Pew Research Center, “Topic: Affirmative action in college admissions,” fact sheet, December 20, 2024.

[32] *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023).

[33] Susan Dominus, “‘There Was Definitely a Thumb on the Scale to Get Boys,’” *New York Times Magazine*, August 8, 2023.

suggests that qualitative measures, such as student essays, pose their own problems.[34] On top of all this, there are characteristics of individual merit, such as excellence in the performing arts, that even the best standardized tests do not capture. None of these factors, however, changes the fundamental obligation. If the university claims that academic excellence is its mission, then its admissions process must visibly reflect that claim.

Yale's admissions website currently states that "all aspects of [an] application are taken into consideration," that "there are no score cutoffs," and that relatively low test scores "can still be helpful."[35] There is, in other words, no stated minimum threshold of academic preparation for admission. Whatever else holistic review allows Yale to take into account, the absence of any clear academic standard is difficult to reconcile with a mission built on academic excellence.

When selective admissions seem so inexplicable—or, worse, tilted in ways that benefit the already advantaged—it should come as no surprise that many Americans do not trust the process.

6. Free Speech and Self-Censorship

Written in 1974, Yale's Woodward Report identifies protections for free speech as the essential precondition for university life, without which there can be no open debate or honest search for truth. The report focuses on the right of invited speakers to express their views without being shouted down or otherwise impeded. At the same time, it affirms the right to peaceful dissent and protest on campus, provided that they do not unduly disrupt basic functions of the university. "Free speech is a barrier to the tyranny of authoritarian or even majority opinion as to the rightness or wrongness of particular doctrines or thoughts," the Woodward committee wrote. It is meant to protect all forms of speech, not just those favored at a particular political moment.

Over the past half century, Yale's administrators have repeatedly affirmed the Woodward Report as the basis for university policies on free speech and campus protest. The very fact that this has been a struggle speaks to the depth of the national challenges. In recent years the university has hosted dozens of controversial speakers without incident. Re-commitment to the Woodward Report and its principles may also help to explain why Yale navigated campus conflicts over the

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[34] AJ Alvero, Sonia Giebel, Ben Gebre-Medhin, Anthony Lising Antonio, Mitchell L. Stevens, and Benjamin W. Domingue, "Essay Content and Style Are Strongly Related to Household Income and SAT Scores: Evidence from 60,000 Undergraduate Applications," *Science Advances* 7, no. 42 (2021).

[35] "What Yale Looks For," Yale University Undergraduate Admissions, accessed March 31, 2026, https://perma.cc/N4P8-64XQ.

October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel and the war in Gaza with less long-term friction than some of its peer institutions.

Even so, the campus has not been immune from pressures toward conformity, intimidation, and social shaming that have affected the rest of higher education and, indeed, the rest of American society. Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that a great deal of campus life is now lived online. Phones and cameras are ubiquitous, and videos of controversial confrontations now drive much public conversation about higher education. In recent decades, Yale has seen its share of such moments. For those who were at Yale or paying attention to its activities in fall 2015, "Halloween" operates as shorthand for a series of events that began with an email from the Yale Intercultural Affairs Committee urging students to think twice about potentially offensive costumes.[36] Subsequent incidents gained international attention, notably with a viral video highlighting a group of students surrounding and shouting at a faculty head of college.

The very word "Halloween" remains charged around campus. Few episodes have done more to raise public questions about Yale's commitment to freedom of expression and open, reasoned debate. At Yale as elsewhere, such events became identified with "cancel culture": The idea that one wrong word or departure from campus orthodoxy could yield outsize punishments and social sanctions.

Certain forms of self-censorship and expectations of social decency are necessary in any functioning society. Such self-regulation has its virtues in the classroom; participants are gathered to speak and learn about a particular subject, not to air unrelated opinions and feelings. But self-censorship driven by fear of personal attack, academic retaliation, or other political pressure undermines the principles of free speech and academic freedom.

Yale's data suggests that self-censorship is a real problem. In a 2025 survey by the university, nearly a third of undergraduate respondents disagreed with the statement that "I feel free to express my political beliefs on campus," up from 17 percent in 2015.[37] Students who self-identified as conservative reported lower rates of comfort, but discomfort appears to be rising across the spectrum. A recent Buckley Institute survey suggested that more than half of college students nationwide feel "intimidated in sharing their opinions, ideas, or beliefs in class."[38] Meanwhile, post-doctoral fellows and international students at Yale report that they now hesitate to speak out, even about their own research, for fear of government retaliation.

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[36] The Intercultural Affairs Committee is now known as the Intercultural Affairs Council.

[37] Yale Office of Institutional Research, *Enrolled Student Survey,* 2025.

[38] Rob Schmidt, *National Undergraduate Study* (Buckley Institute and Inquire, 2025).

When it comes to free speech and self-censorship, it is important to note that some campus constituencies are more vulnerable to sanction than others. Tenured faculty have some of the strongest protections, but even some tenured faculty feel pressure to stay silent or refrain from saying what they really think. Faculty at all levels worry that the wrong book on a syllabus or the wrong idea expressed on social media may damage their careers or get them fired. Some of those concerns focus on informal pressures to conform to prevailing campus opinion, especially on matters involving race, gender, and sexuality. More and more, faculty also express alarm about mounting pressure from beyond the campus, especially from government authorities. Today's newspapers are filled with stories of faculty dismissed or sanctioned for teaching or speaking in ways that run afoul of federal or state initiatives.

Yale has begun to address these problems. In 2024, the president adopted an "institutional voice" policy that prescribed restraint to university leaders, except when addressing matters that "directly implicate the university's core mission, values, functions, or interests," in order to enhance the ability of others on campus to speak their minds.[39] The university has also established a faculty committee on academic freedom and introduced civil dialogue training as part of first-year orientation. While these are positive steps, the challenge of protecting free speech and academic freedom on campus will be ongoing. Like many issues that affect public trust, it requires long-term education and commitment.

7. **Politics and Intellectual Pluralism**

While concerns about free speech and self-censorship are widely shared, conservatives have long offered a more particular critique of higher education: that the nation's leading universities, including Yale, tend to exclude conservative intellectual traditions. Some point to the partisan composition of the faculty, noting that professors overwhelmingly identify with the Democratic party. Others focus on the curriculum, or on the suggestion that liberal professors indoctrinate their students. Taken together, these critiques frame universities as intellectual and ideological echo chambers, out of touch with the American nation and out of step with its political currents.

Estimates suggest that registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans among faculty nationwide by a margin of about 10 to 1.[40] At Yale, according to a 2025 estimate by the Buckley

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[39] Maurie McInnis to Members of the Yale Community, "Report on the Committee on Institutional Voice," October 30, 2024; Yale Committee on Institutional Voice, *Report of the Committee on Institutional Voice* (Yale University, October 27, 2024).

[40] Mitchell Langbert and Sean Stevens, *Partisan Registration and Contributions of Faculty in Flagship Colleges*, National Association of Scholars, January 17, 2020; Mitchell Langbert, "Homogenous: The Political Affiliations of Elite

Institute, registered Democrats outnumber Republicans 36 to 1 across the Faculty of Arts Sciences, the Law School, and the School of Management.[41]

It should come as no surprise that trust in higher education has fallen most among those Americans who identify as Republican or conservative. According to Gallup, the percentage of self-identified Republicans who expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education declined from 56 percent in 2015 to 26 percent in 2025, while confidence among Democrats fell more modestly, from 68 to 61 percent.[42] In one national survey, only 19 percent of Republicans expressed "quite a lot" of confidence that the nation's leading research universities "teach students neutrally and without political bias."[43]

The complaint that colleges and universities lean left is hardly new. William F. Buckley, Jr., made much the same case about Yale in 1951.[44] Yet something distinctive has happened in recent decades. In 1989 approximately 40 percent of the nation's faculty identified as liberal, 40 percent as moderate, and 20 percent as conservative. By 2014, those numbers had shifted to 60 percent liberal, 30 percent moderate, and 10 percent conservative.[45] Of course it is not just the faculty that has changed. The political system has changed too. Fifty years ago, the Democratic and Republican parties were less ideologically divided than they are today. As the parties re-sorted, so did the partisan preferences of many professions, including within higher education.

Our committee reviewed Yale College's course catalogues back to the 1960s. Overall, we found considerable continuity across time. Sixty years ago, Yale College taught more pre-professional classes within the liberal arts curriculum. It also taught significantly fewer classes—often none at all—on subjects related to race, gender, and sexuality. Despite the evolution of the curriculum, many Yale classes still focus on traditional subjects whose forerunners were readily apparent sixty years ago. Economics is the most popular major on campus.

Liberal Arts College Faculty," *Academic Questions* 31, no. 2 (2018): 186–97; Jay Greene, *Educators overwhelmingly support Democrats, even in Republican states* (Education Freedom Institute, undated); Ryan Quinn, "Faculty Overwhelmingly Back Harris in November. But They Won't Tell Students to Do the Same," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 21, 2024; Joshua Koss, *Social Scientists' Views on the State of Research*, Michigan State University, Department of Political Science Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, March 2021.

[41] Buckley Institute, *A Report on Faculty Political Diversity* (fall 2025).

[42] Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided," Gallup, July 8, 2024; Jones, "U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low."

[43] Ken Goldstein, "Yale public opinion studies: September 2025 national, state, and local studies," presentation, November 19, 2025.

[44] William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of Academic Freedom* (Regnery, 1951).

[45] Samuel J. Abrams, "Mind the Professors," *The American Interest*, March 10, 2017.

Our committee spoke with hundreds of Yale students, faculty, alumni, and administrators about the issue of ideological conformity. No subject we took up was more contested. Many students who self-identified as conservative said they had found a real home at Yale, both in the classroom and beyond. But they also said there were classes and communities at Yale where they felt their perspectives were not welcomed or respected. We heard similar concerns from alumni. Many cited exceptions to this rule: the activities of the Yale Political Union, for example, or the Buckley Institute. Still, alumni worried that the campus was trending toward intellectual and ideological conformity.

Other members of the Yale community pushed back against that narrative. Some saw the issue of intellectual diversity as a smokescreen for mounting restrictions on academic freedom. Faculty in the sciences pointed out that their research and teaching typically have little to do with their politics, while faculty in the social sciences and humanities emphasized distinctions among their personal beliefs, their conduct as educators, and their scholarly expertise. Many pointed to the limits of defining political contestation as a struggle between "conservatives" and "liberals," obscuring a variety of divergent positions on national and global politics, especially for internationally recruited faculty.

While such issues remain contested, nearly everyone we spoke to agreed on one thing: Echo chambers do not produce the best teaching, research, or scholarship.

8. The Classroom

Despite centuries of change in technology and higher education curricula, instruction and study still take place mostly in classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and field sites. Students earn their diplomas not by managing an active social life or a slate of extracurricular activities (however educational those experiences may be) but by taking classes and mastering the assigned material. There is arguably no greater threat to higher education than the devaluing of teaching and learning.

Over the years, a constellation of pressures has steadily eroded the centrality of academic work in campus life. Large numbers of students arrive on campus with the idea that their time is best spent in non-academic pursuits. Selective private universities have often reinforced this culture by allowing recruitment from finance, law, and consulting firms as early as a student's first year, before a single round of classes has been completed. Many universities and colleges have turned to underpaid adjunct instructors and contingent workers to teach their classes while hiring full-time benefit-level administrative staff to manage other aspects of campus life. Tenure-track faculty are often told that their highest priority should be their research, not their teaching.

Colleges and universities cannot expect the public to trust or value the classroom if they do not fully value it themselves.

Grading practices are another example. Over the past several decades, grading across many institutions has steadily lost its meaning. In 1963, ten percent of grades in Yale College were an A or A-. In 2022–23, that number was seventy-nine percent. Today, the median student at Yale receives an A. Peer institutions are similar.[46]

The headline problem is called "grade inflation." But the real problem is compression and the difficulty of making comparisons across different classes, instructors, and fields. As grades cluster, they cease to convey useful information about relative student achievement. And since grading practices vary across departments and programs—with some awarding A-range grades to about half of students and others to virtually all—grades are not comparable in any meaningful sense across courses. Yet the university treats them as if they are all the same: qualitatively through a shared letter-grade system that implies common standards, and quantitatively through a cumulative GPA that reduces these varied judgments to a single number. Grades, like colleges and universities, no longer seem trustworthy.

The problem persists because no individual faculty member wants to be the strict grader whose students are disadvantaged relative to peers. No institution wants to be the outlier either. The committee heard firsthand accounts from instructors and lecturers who are not on the tenure track about the particular pressures they face, since their renewal depends largely on student enrollments and evaluations. The result is a collective action problem in which nearly everyone inflates and no one can stop.

These challenges are compounded by the technologies that now pervade campus life. In our conversations with faculty and students, few concerns came up more consistently than the problem of sustained attention. Faculty described classrooms in which students are physically present but mentally elsewhere: scrolling, messaging, emailing. Students themselves largely acknowledged the problem. Few disputed that devices in the classroom undermine the learning experience, and many described feeling unable to resist the pull even when they wanted to.

In the fall of 2025, NYU social psychologist Jonathan Haidt visited Yale as a Presidential Lecturer and presented the research behind his book *The Anxious Generation*, which documents

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[46] Yale College Committee on Grading, *Revised Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Grading* (April 2013); Evan Gorelick, "Faculty report reveals average Yale College GPA, grade distributions by subject," *Yale Daily News*, November 29, 2023; Olivia Woo, "Nodding to Harvard, Lewis foresees Yale effort to curb grade inflation," *Yale Daily News*, February 19, 2026.

the effects of smartphones and social media on adolescent mental health, attention, and social development. Haidt's visit helped to inspire a conversation among faculty and students about the fundamental shift that has taken place in the relationship between technology and learning.[47]

Artificial intelligence presents another, truly unprecedented challenge. No one can predict with confidence how AI will reshape teaching and research. What is already clear, however, is that AI has disrupted established forms of academic work. Certain assignments that once required sustained effort over hours or even weeks can now be completed almost instantly. Faculty across the university are scrambling to redesign syllabi and assessments. Whatever its promise, AI in its current use on campus undermines the expectations of focused, disciplined thinking that have long been the standard features of a rigorous education. Moreover, it is clear that the rapid technological changes of our moment are contributing to declining public trust in the very idea of human expertise.

Finally, there is the question of what students learn, especially what they learn in common. Yale's curricular offerings are broad. This is a strength. But there is no single book, class, or scientific experiment that every Yale student must encounter before graduation. The Directed Studies program offers one model of a "core curriculum." Its intensive and interdisciplinary first-year program has proven rewarding to those who participate in it, and it is now being expanded to meet rising student demand.[48] But it is an opt-in program that reaches only a fraction of students. Many students, faculty, and experts expressed the desire for a shared intellectual experience that would give students across the university something to talk about, argue over, and build upon together. In our fractured era, the absence of such common ground is dearly felt.

9. University Governance

The preceding sections of this report address distinct issues: the cost of higher education, the opacity of admissions, political homogeneity, the devaluation of the classroom. Each has generated its own literature and its own proposals for reform.

Early in our work, the committee recognized that our broad charge risked producing a hodgepodge of complaints, many valid but disconnected. The university's academic mission helps to anchor those issues in a common purpose. But a mission, however clearly stated, does

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[47] Jonathan Haidt, "How To Be a Student in an Era of Anxiety and Political Polarization" (Yale Presidential Lecture, Battell Chapel, Yale University, November 12, 2025); Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024).
[48] Jaeha Jang and Olivia Woo, "Directed Studies program to expand next year, dean says," *Yale Daily News*, October 22, 2025.

not execute itself. Someone must decide how it is implemented. These decisions, and who makes them, are what is meant by "governance." And in many of the areas where we identified a need for change, we found less a failure of intention than a question of governance.

At Yale, governance is shared among the faculty, the administration, and the board of trustees. The president and trustees are the university's fiduciaries. They have wide discretion over managerial and budgetary matters. The faculty govern academic matters such as curricula and tenure standards. As the official "permanent officers" of the university, tenured faculty have not only the right but the obligation to participate in this process.

This division of labor is a powerful model. Yale's residential colleges are one example. Now almost a century old, the colleges are led by faculty heads and residential college deans, with the essential participation of student leaders. They blend teaching, intellectual community, and civic responsibility within a structure of shared governance that is both intimate and consequential. They demonstrate that Yale's governance model can work, that faculty, students, and administrators can govern a living institution together.

In recent decades, however, the general model has come under strain through the growth of non-academic administrative functions across the university. Our committee sought to examine this growth directly. We reviewed Yale's internal records on administration and staffing and found that answering even basic questions proved remarkably difficult. The numbers depend heavily on what is counted, how categories are defined, and how to account for the enormous expansion of clinical operations, particularly at the Medical School. One available metric is headcount, compared across peer institutions. But job classifications across universities are no more comparable than GPAs across departments.

The difficulty, however, is itself the finding. A university committed to evidence-based inquiry and rigorous self-examination should be able to answer a straightforward question: What share of its resources is devoted to its core academic functions, and what share is not? It should be able to say, candidly, where administrative growth has served the mission well and where it has not. And it should be able to demonstrate that judgment through the same quality of evidence it would expect of its own scholarship.

The committee acknowledges that meeting this goal will be genuinely difficult. But this report has argued that institutional practices must be legible to the public, to students, and to the faculty who are charged with upholding the academic mission. The obligation to make internal practices understandable, whether in administration, admissions, budgeting, grading, or

elsewhere, does not diminish because those practices may be hard to explain. If anything, it grows.

Each of the issues described in this report—cost, admissions, political homogeneity, self-censorship, grade inflation—has proven resistant to reform. But unlike many of the forces discussed in this report—social media, national polarization, federal policy—governance is an area that lies within the university's own control. The recommendations that follow are designed to strengthen that capacity. They are, at bottom, acts of self-governance.

10. Recommendations

The following recommendations arise from the committee's year of research, consultation and deliberation:

1. Take responsibility. Universities champion critical thinking. However, those of us in higher education have too often resisted calls to critically examine our own institutions, professions, and modes of thought. As we move forward, we must be willing to admit where we have been wrong and where we might improve, even as we defend what is essential about higher education and its academic mission.

This imperative applies to faculty, who must balance our rights as scholars with our obligations to our students, institutions, communities, nation, and world. But the need for self-scrutiny includes everyone from the first-year undergraduate to members of the Board of Trustees. The tendency to be self-regarding, insular, and unreceptive to legitimate criticism does not engender public trust. A shift in attitude is needed.

2. Focus on the mission. In 2016, departing from its traditional emphasis on the creation and dissemination of knowledge, Yale expanded its mission statement to include "improving the world today," educating "aspiring leaders worldwide," and fostering "an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community."[49] These are all worthy goals. But they are not what makes a university a university.

We recommend that Yale adopt a focused university-wide mission statement such as the one currently articulated in its own Faculty Handbook: "Yale University's mission is to create, disseminate, and preserve knowledge through research and teaching."[50] This statement serves as the basis for the recommendations that follow in this report. At a moment when higher education is being buffeted from all sides, it is imperative to understand what we are here for and what universities do best. That requires clarity, not diffusion, of purpose.

3. Protect free speech. "The history of intellectual growth and discovery clearly demonstrates the need for unfettered freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable," the Woodward Report concluded in 1974.[51] Those values hold true today and require greater protection than ever. The Woodward Report recommended that

[49] Kathrin Lassila, "Mission control," *Yale Alumni Magazine*, September/October 2016.
[50] Yale University Office of the Provost, *Faculty Handbook* (July 1, 2025).
[51] Woodward et al., *Report of the Committee on Free Expression at Yale*.

Yale treat free speech as a first principle, without which there can be no honest search for the truth. We share that view.

Yale's free speech policy includes the right of invited speakers, of any political or intellectual persuasion, to speak unimpeded on campus. It also affirms the right of students, faculty, and other members of the community to engage in peaceful protest, debate, and exchange, though not to disrupt events, shout down speakers, or block access to buildings. We applaud Yale's recent progress in enforcing these rights, and in clarifying sanctions for those who attempt to curtail free speech on campus. The Woodward Report should remain the touchstone for those efforts.

4. Support academic freedom. Academic freedom differs in meaning from free speech. While free speech applies widely, academic freedom primarily concerns the rights and responsibilities of faculty to conduct research, teach classes, engage in campus discussion, and speak as public citizens without fear of reprisal from the university or government. It is and must continue to be the scholarly bedrock of any excellent university. We support the recent appointment of a Yale faculty committee to establish principles of academic freedom for the 21st century. We recommend that the university adopt those principles formally, defend them publicly, and apply them consistently.

5. Make higher education affordable. Lowering the cost of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees is essential for rebuilding public trust. At Yale, the recent expansion of free undergraduate tuition to families earning under $200,000 is a welcome development. More can be done. We recommend that Yale, over time, substantially raise the income limit on the "no tuition" guarantee for undergraduate students. The university should also ensure that charges for families earning modestly above the limit increase gradually rather than sharply.

Transparency matters. We recommend that Yale do everything possible to make the financial aid system more comprehensible, predictable, and fair. Yale's net price calculator is a step in the right direction but leaves too much uncertainty. We recommend that Yale provide a more accessible and reliable indication of the actual price that an undergraduate student will pay at the moment of enrollment and over the course of a four-year degree.

Nationwide, many of the students who carry the most crushing debt burdens have acquired them not as undergraduates but in pursuit of graduate and professional degrees. We applaud Yale's recent expansions of financial support for graduate and professional students, including introducing free tuition students at the schools of Drama, Music, and Divinity, and at the Jackson School of Global Affairs. Certain schools within the university still need greater support, however. We recommend that Yale seek to expand financial aid at the School of Nursing, School of Public Health, and School of the Environment, where graduates regularly carry debt out of proportion to their likely earnings in their chosen professions.

The committee heard proposals for more ambitious reforms—above all, the idea that Yale should eliminate tuition entirely for all undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. Our committee appreciated the clarity and egalitarian spirit of this idea. In the end, though, we disagree. Higher education is something of genuine value and it is costly to provide. Those costs are real; they pay for libraries and laboratories, scholarships and fellowships, faculty and staff. Some of those costs should be borne by wealthier students and families who can afford to pay tuition. Eliminating tuition would increase Yale's dependence on the federal government and on a limited number of large donors, raising the potential for additional problems of undue influence, suspicion, and mistrust. The goal is not to make Yale free, but to make it affordable.

6. Reform undergraduate admissions. Building greater trust in this area must begin with a thoughtful, accurate, and robust accounting of how undergraduate admissions actually works. The university also bears an obligation to articulate a clear set of goals and priorities in admissions, and to conduct the process with as much fairness and respect for the aspirations of young people as it can muster. We recommend that the university embrace a standard of candor: It should only use criteria for admission that it is willing to describe publicly and defend openly. The top priority in admissions decisions should be academic achievement.

The current system of preferences for certain groups of applicants (including varsity athletes, legacies, and children of faculty, staff, and donors) distorts the admissions process by reducing the number of slots available to high-achieving applicants who do not fit into one of the favored categories. We recommend that Yale reduce preferences for special classes of applicants.

We also believe that the admissions system can be made more effective and less onerous for applicants by establishing and making public a minimum standard of academic achievement necessary for consideration. Under the current system, Yale informs potential students that everything matters, leaving applicants scrambling to second-guess what the university wants. A floor such as a minimum SAT score or a Yale-specific entrance exam would ensure that no student is admitted without the requisite academic preparation and ability. It would also spare a meaningful number of applicants time and emotional investment in an application that will not succeed.

7. Open minds. Great teaching and scholarship require contestation. As John Stuart Mill observed, "since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions, that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied."[52] When a campus becomes increasingly uniform in any respect—including in its ideological or political orientation—the collisions Mill describes diminish, as does any chance of finding "the remainder of the truth."

[52] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (J. W. Parker and Son, 1859), 95.

We recommend that Yale undertake a multi-pronged series of initiatives and experiments, with the goal of enhancing open and critical debate on campus. Like everything else we do, they should be anchored in the university's fundamental academic mission.

This process should begin with self-scrutiny. Starting in 2026–27, each department and school should engage in a self-study examining the breadth of its intellectual and methodological commitments; the range of scholarly approaches represented on its faculty; the diversity of perspectives in its curriculum; and the openness of its hiring and admissions practices to dissenting or underrepresented traditions. These self-studies should incorporate input from students and faculty outside the unit to guard against insularity.

Change may happen slowly through this process; indeed, it may not happen at all. In the meantime, there is room to experiment. Many universities have created new scholarly centers with the goal of bringing underrepresented perspectives and methodologies to campus. This approach risks creating silos rather than open interchange but may well be useful as one strategy among many. Current faculty might also be encouraged to co-teach with visiting scholars or practitioners who adopt a different approach or take an orthogonal perspective. In graduate programs, the university should enhance pipeline programs and outreach efforts, where needed, to signal openness to a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints.

Any new undertaking should focus on investments in the intellectual life of the campus, not on short-term concessions to political pressure. We recommend that the university commit substantial resources to departments, schools, centers, and individual faculty who lead demonstrably open processes of intellectual renewal, whether through new curricula, visiting appointments, dedicated research programs, or institutional models not yet tried. No single approach will be sufficient, and the committee itself did not agree on which would prove most effective. That disagreement is not a weakness. It reflects the genuine difficulty of the problem. Our view is that we should take action and see what works.

8. Deliver educational value. Most attempts to measure the return on investment of a college degree rely on individual income: Do graduates earn back what they paid? These measures have real value as a form of accountability. But educational value cannot be reduced to a future paycheck. The value of higher education also includes the public contributions of graduates in public health, nonprofit administration, secondary teaching, the arts, local journalism, government service, and basic scientific research, among other fields. We recommend that Yale ensure that public-serving careers are actively recruited for, well-funded through fellowships and programming, and treated as a source of institutional pride.

It is difficult to predict which jobs will be available and which skills will be needed over the long term. Yale must recognize the epochal advances in technology and artificial intelligence, and ensure that graduates are prepared to deploy, design, and improve these tools. The evolving nature of the job market is also an argument for the broad, flexible, and time-tested form of

education known as the liberal arts. A liberal arts education—which includes the sciences and social sciences as well as the arts and humanities—equips students with foundational wisdom and critical skills that will serve them throughout their lives. We recommend that Yale reaffirm its commitment to the undergraduate liberal arts and work actively to help students translate a liberal arts education into successful professional and civic life.

9. Open the gates. Universities create and share knowledge, but they have often done a better job at the former than the latter. Yale in particular has paid too little attention to the ways that it might communicate and exchange knowledge beyond its own campus and peer institutions. We recommend that the university think more creatively about how to make its research and resources, including its teaching, available to a wider community.

The university's arts schools and programs, museums, medical facilities, online courses, local outreach, and teaching and mentoring efforts already serve the public in numerous ways. We recommend that the University assess whether levels of support for these existing initiatives are sufficient and whether such initiatives are adequately publicized.

The committee heard many proposals for making Yale's educational resources more widely available, including expanded online learning, free continuing education, and local collaborations with the area's public school systems and institutions of higher education. Beyond the New Haven area, we heard proposals for a second domestic campus outside the Northeast, and for inviting Yale's global alumni community to become more involved in teaching and learning within their hometowns, regions, and countries.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive. Rather than engineer a set of top-down solutions, we recommend that the university initiate a generous grant program available to students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the New Haven community who would like to experiment with ways to make Yale's educational resources more broadly available. Based on our conversations, we believe that there is tremendous energy and enthusiasm waiting to be unleashed in this area.

10. Re-center the classroom. In our era of quick fixes and ever-faster information flows, colleges and universities may be the last places where it is possible to slow down, step back, and think systematically. We believe that these qualities are likely to become more important, not less, in the years ahead. We recommend that Yale faculty, students, and administrators work together to make the classroom experience more rigorous and rewarding, with the goal of cultivating sustained attention, intellectual curiosity, and disciplined habits of mind. Recommendations 11–14 are anchored by this fundamental idea.

11. Pay attention. The technologies of the 21st century have transformed teaching, research, and learning in many positive ways. Constant distraction, especially in the classroom, is not one of

them. We recommend that Yale affirmatively support a classroom environment conducive to full presence, focus, and interaction. That begins with a device-free policy—no phones, laptops, or tablets—as the default in classroom settings. Individual faculty may depart from this approach for compelling pedagogical, research, or practical reasons, and students with documented needs must be accommodated. Changing the default, however, will help to restore respect for the living classroom experience as a place of active interchange and focused learning.

12. Resist self-censorship. Faculty have a professional responsibility to create classrooms where open inquiry and intellectual debate thrive. This does not mean that faculty cannot express their own views, where relevant to the subject matter of the course; that would involve more self-censorship, not less. It does mean that faculty have an obligation to engage seriously and forthrightly with challenges to their own perspectives. Indeed, they should encourage it.

We recommend that Yale establish a set of classroom principles designed by a joint committee of faculty and students. The learning process, after all, requires commitment from both groups. For students, that begins with regular attendance and good-faith participation. For faculty, it includes the responsibility to act professionally in the classroom and to ensure that a Yale education does not come with a political litmus test. The protections of academic freedom are crucial for ensuring that the classroom can be a place of open exploration for all (see recommendation 4).

In recent months, some colleges and universities have begun to apply the Chatham House rule to their classrooms; under that rule, students may publicly discuss the content of a course but may not attribute particular comments to given individuals. We feel that the Chatham House rule is unduly restrictive in what should be an open and engaged classroom environment. Instead, we recommend that faculty begin each semester with a discussion of the classroom principles developed by the faculty-student committee, and take measures to reaffirm and enforce those principles as the semester continues.

The challenge of self-censorship extends well beyond the classroom, of course. It takes place in dining halls and faculty meetings, online exchanges and staff retreats. But colleges and universities have a special obligation to protect the classroom as a distinct place, where open exchange and structured conversation can thrive.

13. Grade like we mean it. Grades exist to communicate what students have learned. At Yale, as at many peer institutions, they no longer do. Decades of inflation and compression have rendered the college grading system almost meaningless as an academic measure. Previous efforts to reverse that trend have failed, in part because individual faculty, who rightly control grading in their own courses, have had no institutional framework for acting collectively.

The goal is to restore common grading norms. We recommend a 3.0 mean, or some other college-wide standard, so that letter grades can once again be used in a reliable and

comparable way. This step will require further conversation among the faculty. We urge that it begin now.

In the meantime, a significant improvement can be made without changing any individual grading practice. We recommend that the Yale University Registrar compute course percentiles, or devise a similar mechanism that reflects the context for each grade, and include them on transcripts. This step could be taken immediately. Percentile ranking shows where a student stands relative to the rest of the class, so that an A-minus at the top of a demanding course is recognized as a distinction, not penalized by comparison with grades inflated elsewhere. A student's average percentile across courses would provide a stable, comparable measure of academic standing, to be used for Latin honors, fellowships, and other distinctions tied to academic performance. It should also be made available to students for their own reference. Such a shift gives faculty a reason to grade more rigorously and students reason to seek out challenging courses. It makes the grading system consistent and interpretable. That is what grading is for.

14. Be human. In an era characterized by loneliness and the dissolution of collective spaces, higher education offers something special: On campus, humans gather. While the university cannot and should not attempt to control the use of social media and other digital technologies outside the classroom, it can continue to encourage other ways of being and acting together, including the creation of study halls, tech-free library areas, and common rooms designed for quiet, sustained work free of screens.

Ultimately, though, we believe that leadership on this issue should come from students, who are most directly affected by campus culture and stand in the best position for changing (or reinforcing) its norms. We recommend that Yale create and empower a committee of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students to develop guidelines for social media use and to formulate ideas for encouraging in-person interaction, with the goal of supporting an open, respectful, intellectually vibrant campus culture.

15. Create common knowledge. The curricular requirements in Yale College are diffuse. There is no single course, book, work of art, or scientific experiment that every Yale student is guaranteed to explore before graduation. In a university that prizes specialization, something shared is missing.

We recommend the creation of a civic education initiative that would reach every first-year undergraduate student on a regular basis. We propose day-long programs at least three times per year, each devoted to a core dimension of informed citizenship. For example, those programs might address the structure of American government, quantitative reasoning in public life, and the scientific and technological challenges shaping the coming decades. The residential colleges already reach every entering undergraduate student and provide the right scale for

serious, sustained engagement. This initiative would give Yale's undergraduates a common intellectual foundation from the start.

16. Govern collaboratively. The recommendations in this report are only as durable as the governance structures that implement them. Yale operates through a system of shared governance, in which the trustees and the president hold fiduciary authority while the faculty govern academic matters. That division has served the university well. But most of the recommendations we propose sit at the intersection of academic and institutional authority. They will require sustained collaboration between faculty and administration to succeed.

The key to enhancing trust in both directions is to provide effective institutions and incentives that encourage energetic consultation and serious exchange. At many universities, this includes a university-wide faculty senate. Yale currently has no comparable institution for faculty governance on an institution-wide basis. That time may come. In the meantime, we recommend that faculty-led committees be involved in all major academic and institutional reforms. These committees should be empowered to consult broadly with students, staff, and the wider community.

We also recommend that the university explore ways to enhance lines of communication, mutual trust, and consultation with campus and community constituencies. Collaborative governance means more than consulting with faculty. Staff participate in university governance through a variety of mechanisms, including, crucially, their labor unions. Students, both undergraduate and graduate, sustain important representative institutions at Yale, and they participate in on-the-ground governance in many spaces of the university. Governance built on consultation is slower than governance by decree. It is also more legitimate and more likely to last.

17. Streamline bureaucracy. The oft-heard criticism of disproportionate bureaucratic growth or so-called administrative bloat in U.S. higher education matters for both external and internal trust. Some of that growth emanates from federal and state government pressures, which have established enormous legal and bureaucratic compliance processes. These requirements have become unstable and unpredictable, whiplashing colleges and universities from year to year. Yale's experience in this regard has not been significantly different from that of peer institutions. We recommend that Yale leadership collaborate with other like-minded university leaders to encourage and enable government departments and agencies to distinguish necessary from unnecessary academic compliance processes. This is a long-term goal, but an urgent one.

Yale has its own internal responsibility to streamline bureaucracy. It was remarkably difficult for our committee to answer a basic question: What share of Yale's resources is devoted to its core academic functions and what share is not? The data were not easy to interpret. A university committed to evidence-based inquiry should be able to account for its own

administrative growth with the same rigor it expects of its scholarship. One important domain is research overhead. Greater transparency would help the public and scientists alike have confidence that university funds are being used to support research infrastructure efficiently.

We recommend that Yale undertake a transparent review of its administrative structure, conducted jointly with faculty and measured against the academic mission. The purpose is not to cut indiscriminately. Yale's long-standing commitment to retaining and retraining employees through attrition, reallocation, and retirement incentives must be honored. Streamlining must not preserve the positions of those at the top at the expense of those throughout the institution. But the governing principle should be clear. It should be hard to administratively expand, and easy to contract.

18. Build trust with the trustees. Yale's trustees are the university's fiduciaries, and the faculty govern its academic mission. Trustees appoint the university's presidents, oversee its resources, approve its budgets, and safeguard its long-term interests. Yet by the nature of their demanding volunteer positions, trustees are distant from day-to-day life on campus. The committee appreciates the Board's efforts to create or revive informal ways to enhance connection, communication, and trust. But more formal methods are also called for.

To enhance communication in both directions, we recommend that the Yale faculty, through the boards of permanent officers, appoint or elect a limited number of faculty representatives to serve as liaisons to the Board of Trustees and its committees. Faculty liaisons would bring academic perspective to trustee deliberations on matters that affect the university's core mission, and they would report back to the wider campus on the board's direction and priorities. This obligation runs both ways. Faculty who have too often treated institutional governance as someone else's responsibility must be willing to engage with it seriously, not as a distraction from scholarship but as an extension of the duty that tenure confers.

We also recommend that the Board of Trustees include, at all times, experienced scholars and academic leaders among its members. Trustees drawn exclusively from business and finance, however capable, will inevitably require the administration to translate between institutional decisions and academic consequences. Scholars on the Board would assist the trustees in enhancing the university's mission and remove a burden from the university's upper administration, which otherwise must do all the work of explaining campus life to the trustees in routine and emergency matters.

19. Communicate effectively. This report has argued that trust is built through action, not messaging. That remains true. But action that no one sees or understands cannot build trust either. In recent months, universities including Yale have adjusted their communications strategies to emphasize the most popular aspects of higher education: medical breakthroughs, public service, contributions to the economy. This is a welcome and necessary development. But

it is not sufficient. We recommend that Yale develop a sustained, long-term commitment to communicating about its mission, its decisions, and its reforms. This should not be treated as a public relations campaign but as an extension of the transparency this report calls for throughout.

Effective communication begins with having something credible to say. But communication means listening too. We recommend that Yale do more to listen to Americans across the country—from families worried about college costs to those who feel universities have become disconnected from their values—through initiatives such as town halls and advisory councils. Building trust will require sustained attention to what the public wants and needs from its system of higher education.

20. Lead by example. Many of the challenges facing higher education cannot be solved by one school, college, or university alone. Trust is a collective process, problem, and aspiration; what happens on one campus affects what happens elsewhere. We recommend that Yale take concrete actions on its own campus, while working with other colleges and universities toward the common goal of building trust in higher education.

Selected Bibliography

The literature related to trust in higher education is voluminous and changing day by day. Below is a list of works that provide useful context for the committee's work. In addition to the works listed here, the committee followed campus, local, national, and international media as events in higher education developed throughout the year.

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Appendix: The Work of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education

1. Consultations and Conversations

Between April 2025 and March 2026, members of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education engaged in one-on-one or small-group conversations with hundreds of individuals. Many of these consultations were conducted in confidence to allow for frank exchange. The views, expertise, and insight shared in these conversations greatly informed and enhanced the committee's deliberations.

To gain public perspective, committee members interviewed politicians, journalists, scholars, policymakers, activists, and critics of higher education representing a wide range of views. Our interviews included members of local government and community organizations as well as national figures.

Within the world of higher education, the committee consulted with representatives of national organizations such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association of Colleges & Universities, the American Association of University Professors, the Association of American Universities, and Heterodox Academy, in addition to faculty members and university leaders from an array of institutions.

At Yale, the committee spoke with students, faculty, and administrators from every academic corner of campus. We also engaged with campus organizations including student government, employee unions, religious institutions, and the university's cultural centers. To deepen our understanding of university policy, we consulted with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, Office of the Provost, and Office of Institutional Research, among other administrative bodies. Finally, we spoke with Yale alumni, donors, trustees, and parents about their perspectives on campus life.

2. Events and Visiting Experts

Beginning in October 2025, the committee hosted or co-sponsored a wide range of campus events, listening sessions, and consultations with visiting experts. The listening sessions and public events were open to all members of the Yale community.

i. Listening sessions

Hosted by the Committee on Trust in Higher Education

October 22, 2025. Sterling Law Building
October 23, 2025. Sterling Hall of Medicine
October 28, 2025. Kline Tower
October 29, 2025. William L. Harkness Hall
November 9, 2025. West Campus Conference Center

ii. The Future of Higher Education: A Conversation Series

Hosted by the Committee on Trust in Higher Education

November 4, 2025. Danielle Allen (James Bryant Conant University Professor, Harvard University; founding director, Democratic Knowledge Project)

December 2, 2025. Vanita Gupta (Director, Center for Law and Public Trust, New York University)

January 13, 2026. Musa al-Gharbi (Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Journalism, Stony Brook University)

January 21, 2026. Carlos Carvalho (President, University of Austin)

January 28, 2026. Corey Robin (Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Brooklyn College)

February 9, 2026. Jenna Silber Storey (Senior Fellow; Ravenel Curry Chair in Civic Thought; Codirector, Center for the Future of the American University, American Enterprise Institute)

iii. Committee on Trust in Higher Education co-sponsored events

October 8, 2025. Julia Adams and Beverly Gage with Pericles Lewis (Dean of Yale College), "Dean's Dialogue on Trust in Higher Education"

November 12, 2025. Jonathan Haidt (Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership, NYU Stern School of Business), "How to be a student in an era of anxiety and political polarization," Yale Presidential Lecture

December 5, 2025. Anton Bennett, Anthony Leiserowitz, Carl Zimmer (Professor (Adjunct) of Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry, Lecturer in English), moderated by Priyamvada Natarajan, "Science in a Skeptical World: Fighting Denialism & Building Trust," Franke Program in Science and the Humanities

April 6, 2026. Sanjay Sarma (Fred Fort Flowers (1941) & Daniel Fort Flowers (1941) Professor in Mechanical Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Richard Levin (Frederick William Beinecke Professor of Economics Emeritus; President Emeritus, Yale University), and Peter Salovey (Sterling Professor of Psychology; Professor of Management, Public Health, & Sociology; President Emeritus, Yale University), moderated by Priyamvada Natarajan, "New Models for Higher Education: Beyond Traditional Degrees to Fluid Career-Linked Learning," Franke Program in Science and the Humanities

iv. Consultations with the Committee

In addition to these public events, the full committee held consultations with experts including:

Ken Goldstein (Senior fellow, Association of American Universities)

Angel Adams Parham (Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Virginia)

Mitchell Stevens (Professor, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University)

Keith Whittington (David Boies Professor of Law, Yale Law School)

Molly Worthen (Professor of History, University of North Carolina)

3. Events Related to Trust in Higher Education

The committee benefited from a wide array of discussions, talks, and conferences relevant to the subject of trust in higher education, sponsored by other organizations both at Yale and beyond. Committee members participated in or attended the following events:

August 17, 2025. Deans panel, Yale College Opening Days, Yale College Dean's Office

August 25, 2025. Community standards panel, Yale College Opening Days, Yale College Dean's Office

September 18, 2025. Daniel Schillinger (Lecturer, Yale Department of Political Science), Lux et Veritas Faculty Prize lecture, Buckley Institute

September 19, 2025. Committee on Trust in Higher Education presentation to Yale Alumni Association board meeting

September 26, 2025. Joy Connolly (President, American Council of Learned Societies), "What is the university for?," Archaia Program for the Study of Global Antiquity

September 26, 2025. Jukka Savolainen (Professor of Sociology, Wayne State University), Meeting on Professional Organizations, Heterodox Academy

September 29, 2025. "University Negotiations & Settlements w/the Trump Administration: What everyone needs to know," Yale chapter, American Association of University Professors

October 7, 2025. Committee on Trust in Higher Education presentation, FAS-SEAS Senate meeting

October 8, 2025. Don Romesburg (Visiting Professor of History and Women's, Gender, and Queer Studies, California Polytechnic State University), "Contested Curriculum: LGBTQ History Goes to School," Yale Research Initiative on the History of Sexualities

October 28, 2025. Beverly Gage (John Lewis Gaddis Professor of History; co-chair, Committee on Trust in Higher Education), "Should universities reform themselves?" Yale Center for Civic Thought

October 31, 2025. Jeffrey McDonough (Department Chair and Young J. Lee and Young Ju Rhee Professor of Philosophy; Director of the Harvard History of Philosophy Workshop), "Trust Science?" Elm Institute

November 3, 2025. Daniel Wasserman (Policy Adviser, White House), "Reforming universities through executive action: A view from the White House," Yale Center for Civic Thought

November 5, 2025. "Academic Freedom Under Attack: A Transatlantic Conversation," Race, Coloniality, and Migration in Europe Working Group, Yale

November 7–9, 2025. Conference: "Reimagining elite higher education: An academic social contract for our time," Class Action

November 14, 2025. Conference: "Fifteenth Annual Conference on The Future of American Conservatism," keynote speaker Governor Ron DeSantis, Buckley Institute

November 20, 2025. Committee on Trust in Higher Education presentation, Yale Alumni Assembly

December 3, 2025. Laurie Patton (President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences), "How should universities think about pluralism?" Yale Center for Civic Thought

December 4, 2025. Committee on Trust in Higher Education presentation, Yale College Faculty Meeting

January 21, 2026. Stuart Buck (Executive Director, The Good Science Project), "Reproducible Science is Good Science," Yale School of Public Health, Data Intensive Social Science Center, Institute for Social and Policy Studies

January 22, 2026. Andrew Delbanco (Alexander Hamilton Professor of American Studies, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University), "Universities & Humility," Yale Center for Civic Thought

January 27, 2026. Conference: "Rebounding from Surviving to Thriving: Higher Education Regaining its Footing," Yale Higher Education Leadership Summit, Chief Executive Leadership Institute, Yale School of Management

February 9, 2026. Jenna Silber Storey (Codirector, Center for the Future of the American University, American Enterprise Institute), "Is there a civic remedy for the restless soul?" Yale Center for Civic Thought

February 10, 2026. "Rebuilding trust in public health: Causes, consequences, and responses," Yale School of Public Health, co-sponsored by The Institution for Social and Policy Studies and the MacMillan Center for International & Area Studies

February 12, 2026. Faculty Discussion on Higher Education Reform, Vanderbilt University (via zoom)

February 17, 2026. "What Rights to Academic Freedom Do You Really Have at Yale? What Rights Should You Have?" American Association of University Professors, Yale chapter

March 2, 2026. Laura Marcus '10 (Co-Executive Director, Tidelines Institute), "Has college become too individualistic? Could it be rebuilt around a common life?" Yale Center for Civic Thought

March 3, 2026. David Brooks (Presidential Senior Fellow, Yale Jackson School of Global Affairs), "Why, Despite Everything, I Still Call Myself a Conservative," Jackson School of Global Affairs

March 3, 2026. "Organizing, Building, and Defending the University in Precarious Times," Gruber Program and the Information Society Project

March 4, 2026. "Teaching and Learning Discussion: Grading and Grade Inflation: Instructional Faculty Experiences," Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning

March 5, 2026. "How can we get viewpoint diversity in higher ed" (via zoom), Heterodox Academy

March 24, 2026. Committee on Trust in Higher Education presentation, FAS-SEAS Senate meeting

March 24, 2026. "Faculty Governance: Does Restoring Trust in Higher Education Start with Us?" American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in partnership with the Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education (APT) of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Cambridge, MA

April 3, 2026. Benjamin S. Bernard (Postdoctoral Associate, Yale Department of History), "Trust in Universities: Lessons from History," Elm Institute

Spring 2026. Benjamin S. Bernard, HIST 3127 / EDST 1127: "Trust et veritas: the public legitimacy of universities," Undergraduate research seminar, Yale Department of History

4. Staff

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