NEWS

"Quit playin' games with my heart"
QUIT PLAYING GAMES (WITH MY HEART) BACKSTREET BOYS

McInnis talks grading, town halls and D.C. in post-midterms interview

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GARRETT CURTIS / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

In her first interview since the midterm elections, Yale President Maurie McInnis fielded questions about the University's ongoing talks with the Trump administration, her approach to meeting with students and her experience with grade inflation as a professor.

University President Maurie McInnis is facing a historic test as the University seeks a voluntary resolution to the federal government's investigation into its admissions practices.

As she faces criticism for what some students, faculty and alumni describe as a lack of transparency about the federal negotiations, McInnis sat down on Monday for a 30-minute interview with the News. In her first interview since the midterm elections that dealt a striking rebuke to President Donald Trump, McInnis struck a muted tone on the federal investigation, the results of the midterms and Trump's role in declining trust in universities. But she offered some details on her activities on Capitol Hill and her experience with grade inflation as a professor at the University of Virginia.

When asked if she expects a different approach from the Department of Justice following the midterms, McInnis said, "I have no ability to predict the future."

No updates on Trump talks, but willingness to share

There are no new updates on the Justice Department's investigations, McInnis said.

She added that she "wouldn't use the term negotiations" to describe the situation. In October, McInnis said she wouldn't use "talks" to describe the communication between the University and the Trump administration. But when asked on Monday about the fact that her office's frequently asked questions page calls the process one of "listening and talking," she said "talking is part of the process of sharing information as part of the voluntary resolution."

News broke about the negotiations in June, when The New York Times reported that a Justice Department investigation into admissions practices at Yale's medical school had expanded to include the College and Law School, and that Yale had offered one settlement proposal. McInnis has since offered limited updates, and she has come under fire for what critics call her lack of transparency.

On Saturday, the coalition Democratize Yale — whose demands include Yale ending negotiations with the Justice Department — held a town hall, which organizers said McInnis and Yale Corporation senior trustee Marta Tellado GRD '02 declined to attend. Asked whether community members should trust her to share timely updates, McInnis said, "Yes, because, well, if there were updates to share with the community, I would share those updates with the community."

When asked if she would consider being part of a future public forum, McInnis said, "I have said, and I will say again, that what is important is I will continue meeting with students. I have met with them many times, and with many of the individuals who have been part of asking for this larger town hall."

In July, McInnis met with graduate and undergraduate student leaders including Yale College Council President Alex William Chen '28, who has collaborated with Democratize Yale. In September, she also met with Elias Theodore '27, who represents the University's central campus in New Haven's Board of Alders and has also collaborated with Democratize Yale.

When asked again if she would consider participating in a public forum, she said, "I'm not going to give you a direct answer on that because details and circumstances matter."

McInnis did not answer a question about why Yale hired the law firm McGuireWoods, one of several representing the University.

"You would need to ask somebody from our legal department," she said. "I am not myself directly engaged in the hiring of our law firms."

McInnis experienced grade inflation as a professor

McInnis has charged Yale College's Committee on Teaching, Learning and Advising with developing recommendations on grade inflation in April following the release of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education's report, which named grade inflation as a contributing factor to declining public trust in universities. Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis said last week any new grading policy would not kick in until fall 2028.

McInnis said she saw grade inflation as a concern when she taught as an art history professor at the University of Virginia.

"When I was a professor, I sometimes got phone calls from parents, complaining about grades their children received," she said. "There has been a steady upward pressure for 20 or 30 years on this, and you can see it in the grades — average grades — at many universities."

Around 81 percent of grades that Yale College students received in the 2024-25 school year were either A's or A-minuses.

McInnis votes in every election, and she has met with Bernie Sanders

McInnis has previously described visits to Capitol Hill that include lobbying lawmakers who make decisions that impact Yale and higher education.

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont is set to chair the Senate committee with jurisdiction over education when the new Congress begins in January. McInnis has not reached out to him since the midterms, she said on Monday, but she has met with him "at some point in the last session." She declined to share details about the conversation.

McInnis praised student groups' efforts to get Yalies to the polls and said she votes in every election.

McInnis skirts question on Trump's role in trust in universities

Since beginning as University president, McInnis has highlighted the decline of trust in higher education as a priority area for Yale to address. In the spring of her first year as president, she formed a committee to study the subject that in April released a report recommending sweeping changes to Yale.

After Trump began his second term, his administration launched a series of investigations into elite universities, accusing them of allowing campus antisemitism and discriminating based on race. The Trump administration also criticized what it perceived as a lack of viewpoint diversity on college campuses.

When asked if she thinks Trump has played a role in declining trust in higher education, McInnis did not answer directly and instead pointed to the broader reasons for a lack of trust, including the cost of attendance.

"If you look at the polling data, what you will see is a steady decline in trust in higher education for over a decade," she said. "It has spread across all demographic groups. It spreads across both major political parties. It spreads across all age groups. So it has been in steady decline for more than a decade."

After attending the University of Virginia as an undergraduate, McInnis received a master of arts, a master of philosophy and a doctorate from Yale in 1990, 1993 and 1996, respectively.

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Yale aims to dismiss alum's lawsuit alleging exploitation via meal plan

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Yale is seeking to dismiss a class action lawsuit that alleges that Yale violates Connecticut law by making students buy meal swipes and dining points that expire.

The lawsuit, filed by Tashroom Ahsan '25 and dated December 2025, claims that Yale, "intending to gain a financial windfall," forces students to purchase more meals and dining points than they will use. The back-and-forth litigation between the plaintiff and the University centers around whether Yale's ID cards or meal plans count as gift certificates under Connecticut gift card law, which prohibits anyone from issuing gift certificates that expire.

"The main thing that I hope is that either the money that you spend for a meal plan will get refunded to you or will not expire," Ahsan said in a phone interview. "Either way, that that money does not just disappear. Because we spend a lot of money to eat that Yale food, and if we don't get to take advantage of that, I think that it feels pretty exploitative."

Nearly a month following an October hearing on Yale's motion to dismiss the lawsuit at the Hartford District Superior Court, the case is still ongoing.

Dining hall meal plans came under scrutiny following a 2024 fact sheet from the Biden administration that stated "flex dollars" create a "financial penalty" as students forfeit money or are forced to spend their remaining funds on unnecessary items before they expire. Similar lawsuits have been brought against other universities, including Rutgers and Cornell — both of which involved a law firm representing Ahsan.

"The university does not comment on pending litigation," Alexa Gotthardt, a spokesperson for Yale Hospitality, wrote in an email to the News on Friday.

Yale's meal plans have two components: swipes and points. Swipes can be used at residential dining halls, while points — each worth approximately $1 — are used at Commons and other retail locations run by Yale Hospitality.



ABBY ASSOUAD / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

The University has sought to throw out a lawsuit brought by a recent graduate of Yale College, who sued Yale nearly a year ago for forcing students to buy meal swipes and dining points that expire. The alum said Yale's policy feels "pretty exploitative."

In 2025, Yale Hospitality announced that Commons and the Bow Wow, Yale's student convenience store, would no longer accept meal swipes. The changes earned mixed reactions from students, adding to long-standing debates over the value of Yale's meal plans. In 2024, the flex meal plan was undervalued by $816.

Ahsan brought the lawsuit upon Yale on behalf of himself and "all others similarly situated," including students who had any unused meal-plan value expire "during or at the conclusion of any semester in any academic year within the relevant statute of limitations." The lawsuit seeks damages from Yale and for the University to give up "all amounts unjustly charged."

Ahsan transferred to Yale in 2023 and graduated in December 2025. During his first year, he was on the Full meal plan and in his second, he was on the Connect meal plan, according to an affidavit that Jodi Smith Westwater, assistant vice president of Yale Hospitality, submitted in the case. At the time, the Full plan consisted of only swipes while the Connect plan included both swipes and points.

Ahsan said that he did not use the full value of the meal plan in either year, eating one to two meals a day when living on campus and less than five times a week when living off campus.

"I don't think I ever ate three meals a day on campus," he said.

The lawsuit alleges that Yale is "well aware" students may have trouble making use of their meal plan, including dining dollars. The University violates the Connecticut Unfair Trade Practices Act, the lawsuit states, which prohibits anyone from engaging in "unfair methods of competition" and "unfair or deceptive acts" in the conduct of trade or commerce.

The lawsuit alleges that the Yale ID or meal plan is also a gift certificate under state law. Since Connecticut prohibits anyone from issuing gift certificates that expire, the lawsuit continues, Yale's meal plan practices are illegal.

"You have money that you bought that is money that can only be spent in a specific institution," Ahsan said. "So that is quite literally a gift card. It's pretty clearly the same thing as a gift card."

In April, Yale sought to have the lawsuit thrown out of court, filing a 50-page combined motion to dismiss and strike. In July, it filed a 46-page reply in support of that motion. In court filings, Yale argued that Yale IDs are not gift cards, that Yale's policies are standard practice at universities and that meal choices at Yale could become "fewer or less expensive (and less appealing)" if Yale had to give refunds.

Yale said that since Ahsan's 2023-24 Full meal plan did not include points, he could not have suffered damages from unused points that year. The University further alleged that Ahsan also could not have suffered damages in the 2024-25 academic year, as Yale covered the cost of his meal plan during that period.

"Plaintiff chose not to use all his swipes and points and now claims that his choice makes him the victim of all sorts of commercial wrongdoing," reads Yale's July court filing. "But he got what he was promised; in fact, Yale paid for the overwhelming majority of his education, room, and board in the two years he focuses on."

According to an affidavit from Nicole LeBlanc, Yale's bursar, Ahsan received $80,775 in financial aid in the 2024-25 academic year, which more than covered his total billed expenses of $73,985, including $3,500 for the Connect plan.

But according to Ahsan, he could have used that money to buy food elsewhere — especially when he lived off campus.

"I made my bill as small as possible so I could afford to go to this school," he said. "That decision has nothing to do with whether or not I was financially exploited in the same fashion that every other student was for this thing."

Yale's filing also alleges that Ahsan was aware of the dining points system, but chose to come to Yale regardless.

"No one forced him to attend Yale," the University's filing reads. "There are thousands of colleges in the United States; the fact that Yale, or any other college, offers uniform contracts to all students, rather than negotiating one student at a time, does not make the contractual terms unconscionable."

Ahsan acknowledged that Yale's claim that he came knowing the meal plan cost "was true," but said that it "is a non sequitur from the law, which is that it is illegal to have prepaid money that is constrained to a specific institution expire, which is exactly what they're doing."

Yale's filing further warns that an "overbroad" interpretation of gift certificates would lead to "absurd and unworkable results."

"If a student should get a partial refund of the meal plan because he slept past breakfast and so didn't use his ID to swipe into the dining hall, then should he also get a partial refund of his tuition because he slept past his 9 a.m. class and so didn't use his ID to swipe into the class?" reads the University's April filing.

Yale Hospitality's Full meal plan costs $4,760 per semester.

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