OPINION

GUEST COLUMNISTS

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Austerity is a choice

Last year, Yale told students on financial aid that one of their summer fellowships was cut. Then their storage money. Then a chunk of the cultural centers' budgets. The explanation, when there was one, was brief: we can't afford it.

But Yale's endowment grew by $4.5 billion last year. One month of gains is enough to pay the endowment tax. There is no version of that math where Yale is the victim.

We're JR and Michelle, and we're running for Yale College Council President and Vice President. We met on the Dwight Hall Student Executive Committee. We both want to go into public interest law. And two years in, here's what we've learned about how this place functions.

Yale runs on an information gap. Without citing their sources, administrators tell you donor priorities have shifted away from summer funding. They claim to be fighting for us behind the scenes while they bow, in public, to politicians who want to gut higher education. The gap is the strategy: if you don't know what's happening, Yale gets to frame its choices as inevitable. They aren't.

Yale is one of the richest institutions on earth, with an endowment surpassing the GDP of 110 countries. When it tells you it can't afford to fund summer experiences we were promised, or to keep the lecturers you love, or to stop investing in the companies building surveillance tools for immigration law enforcement and the Israeli military, it isn't describing a budget. It's choosing a set of priorities.

So here's what we're running on:

Respect for students means Yale restores what it has cut. Stop treating financial aid like a marketing brochure, treat it like a promise. Lift the time, place and manner restrictions that govern how we gather on our own campus, whether we're throwing a performative male contest or holding a protest.

Respect for workers means a $22 student minimum wage so students don't have to work 19 hours a week to keep up. Stop quietly pushing out the lecturers of classes we love. Join the Fair Food Program.

Respect for New Haven means Yale remembering where it lives. Yale deploys its tax-exempt status to withhold property taxes on a third of the city's land, leaving New Haven $110 million short each year of the fully-funded schools and affordable housing our city deserves. Yale refuses to meet student demands to divest from surveillance startups and detention camps, companies that help ICE terrorize our neighbors. We'll continue fighting for Yale to do right by our city.

Every spring, two people write an op-ed like this one. They list off their resumes. They promise students a "seat at the table." They win, and then nothing much happens. That's because the YCC they inherit isn't built for students to build power. It's built to pass unimaginative resolutions and send politely worded letters that administrators politely ignore. It has quietly settled into an institution Yale can point to when it wants to claim student consent on a decision it would've made anyway.

The YCC's only real job is to be the organizing body for Yale students, and it is failing. An organizing body is built out of relationships, not resolutions.

The YCC's petition to restore the cut summer grants showed that the YCC can mobilize students. But the petition didn't build lasting power and failed to create future opportunities for escalation. Instead, student leaders accepted a closed-door meeting that didn't go anywhere but a campaign website. We need leaders willing to hold the line on student demands for full restoration of the funding.

Yale moves when students don't organize alone. The "Yale: Respect New Haven" street painting outside SSS is a reminder. In 2021, students, unions, faculty and New Haven residents came together to demand respect, and Yale conceded a historic increase in its payments to the city. That coalition is the only thing administrators have ever been afraid of, and coalition-building is what we do best. Michelle lost sleep for weeks organizing 300 Yalies to support 300 Troup School students in the Season of Giving drive. JR organized a YCC divestment referendum with over 3,330 voters and built support from a U.S. senator for student movements on campus.

Yale protects its reputation above all else, which is where the leverage is. Bulldog Days. Commencement. Donor weekends. Every admissions cycle, every press cycle. Those are the moments when student voices reach the audiences Yale actually listens to, and that's how movements here have always won. Let's rebuild the YCC into a body that tells students the truth, connects them to the people already organizing and turns them out in numbers Yale can no longer ignore.

Yale has the money. What it doesn't have, yet, is a student body organized enough to win the respect we deserve. We're running to build one.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

NATE STEIN

Finding disagreement in unexpected places

When I joined the Yale Glee Club at the beginning of my first year, I thought I knew what I was signing up for: a small part in Yale's musical tradition and membership in a tight-knit community of musicians. This proved to be true, but what I did not expect was just how much the Glee Club would challenge my assumptions about people and politics. It has taught me that some of the most meaningful disagreements happen in the places we least expect.

I used to enter many situations at Yale with a level of caution. As a conservative student here, I think it was almost instinctive. Because most of my peers don't agree with me, starting a conversation could be tricky. At the very least, since Trump's victory in 2024, it was difficult to find much nuance when I talked about current events. Some people were angry that I would support any of his policies in the first place; others were annoyed that I would vote for him despite disagreeing on several key issues. In either case, I always prepared for outrage and pushback.

Given what I know about the political makeup of music departments and music schools, both at Yale and around the country, I expected that a group like the Yale Glee Club would be ideologically uniform. I figured that political differences especially would either go unspoken or would be unwelcome. I imagined that, at best, my views would be quietly tolerated and, at worst, outwardly judged. But I never expected much real engagement, and in that sense, I could not have been more wrong.

One of the defining features of the Glee Club is our corny use of the prefix "gl-" — perhaps most notable in our "glamilies," which are smaller groups that welcome the first years into the Glee Club and try to make an 80-person choir feel a little bit more intimate.

My glamily last year had members from all four classes and from different religions, hometowns, upbringings and political ideologies. It was with them that I had my first truly open conversations at Yale about politics. Over the course of the year, we discussed Trump in his second term, religion, campus protest, Glee Club repertoire and everything in between. We disagreed often, and passionately, but we were good listeners. It never felt performative or condescending. It wasn't a competition of who could speak the loudest or get the most words in. We genuinely tried to understand one another. We asked questions. And as stupid as it sounds to even say, we always approached our conversations in good faith.

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In so many places — around campus, online and in the world beyond Yale — there's a tendency to reduce one another to labels, headlines and straw men. Real conversations become impossible. Unexpectedly, what I've found in the Glee Club, especially within my own glamily, is a refusal to let that happen. I have been incredibly surprised by how willing most people are to listen, think, ask questions and disagree respectfully, challenging ideas but not dismissing the people who espouse them.

Before I started at Yale, I assumed that special conditions and carefully curated spaces were necessary for meaningful dialogue across difference of opinion. But productive disagreement doesn't demand perfect conditions. My time in the Glee Club has shown me that it is possible to disagree well in unexpected spaces — perhaps not everywhere and definitely not all the time but maybe more often than we might think. Precisely where I expected to find an echo chamber, I found a community that was genuinely open to engaging despite our many differences. I was wrong about this little corner of the Yale community, and I'm sure I would feel the same way about other groups, too, regardless of the extracurricular activities or shared interests that bring them together.

So now nearly two years into my time at Yale, what was once total caution has become cautious optimism. I don't mean the kind that ignores the complexities of our nation's politics or pretends that deep-seated disagreements can be cleanly or easily resolved. I mean the kind which suggests that we might be underestimating one another, that there are more opportunities for good-faith conversation than we might originally assume and that sometimes those opportunities exist in the places we least expect. My time in the Glee Club has shown me that these opportunities are worth pursuing whenever possible, and I would urge my peers to pursue them, too.

NATE STEIN *is a sophomore in Saybrook College studying Political Science. His column looks for nuance in arguments about freedom of speech and viewpoint diversity. He welcomes your thoughts, critiques and questions at nate.stein@yale.edu.*

STAFF COLUMNIST

HANNAH OWENS PIERRE

Free speech should make us uncomfortable

Last Friday, Sen. Rick Scott of Florida argued on X that Yale should lose its federal funding because the Yale Political Union was planning to host left-wing streamer Hasan Piker. "An elite private university that hosts an antisemite who says a Senator should be killed, capitalists should be killed, and the U.S. deserved 9/11, shouldn't get ONE CENT from taxpayers," he wrote.

Scott is right about one thing. Piker, in his support for left-wing extremism, has said horrific things, such as defending the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, claiming the terrorist organization Hamas is "a thousand times better" than Israel and calling for Scott to be killed. His political perspective is grounded in a hatred of America, the country that allowed him to make millions of dollars, and a violent contempt against those who disagree with him.

When I debated the left-wing streamer Destiny this past winter at Yale, I publicly criticized him for making similar statements inciting violence against conservatives and mocking Charlie Kirk's death.

And yet, Scott's reaction to these comments is far more troubling than anything Piker has said.

In America, we are lucky enough to have a constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech. The First Amendment states that Congress should pass no law "abridging the freedom of speech." Let's be clear about why this is. The First Amendment is not designed to protect only speech that we agree with. In fact, it is meant to do the exact opposite: The way to tell if a country truly protects free expression is whether it allows the most disgusting and disturbing speech possible.

Of course, the First Amendment does not protect direct incitement to imminent violence. But offensive, inflammatory and even reckless political rhetoric has long been protected. In Texas v. Johnson, the Court held that burning the flag, an action I find to be reprehensible, is constitutionally protected. So too is the so-called "hate speech" that liberals frequently rally against. And so too are Piker's comments, grotesque as they may be.

To be fair, Scott is not calling for any law to bar Piker from speaking. But what he is doing is almost as dangerous. If successful, his call for Yale's funding to be completely cut in response to hosting a controversial figure would send a message across the whole country: Universities cannot host speakers who hold views that are outside of the current Overton window. This is the definition of chilling speech, and it goes against what our First Amendment is designed to promote, even in private institutions like universities.

A consequence of such a norm being established would be the absolute desecration of the modern university. Schools like Yale would no longer invite guest speakers who seem too radical, nor invite discussion on their ideas. Yet, these ideas would not go away. As we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, censoring speech regarding vaccinations had backfire effects. Shutting down debate is unsurprisingly not a great way of convincing people.

Is there really a great difference between a policy that prohibits universities from hosting certain debates and one that threatens to destroy them if they do? In both cases, the result is the same. There will be less dialogue and less expression overall.

It is important to note that Scott is making this call not as a regular citizen, but as a United States Senator. He has real political power. And he is choosing to exercise his power by attempting to shut down a public debate. Although his actions are not directly unconstitutional, they do violate the spirit of our Constitution, in the same way that cancel culture, although itself protected, undermines the spirit of our Constitution.

To be clear, in hosting Piker, the Yale Political Union is not endorsing his views. The union is notably chaired by a member of its Party of the Right and contains many conservative members. Rather, the union is doing what it is designed to do: promote open debate and free expression. Piker's debate with the union on Tuesday was an opportunity for students to confront him on his past statements and defend America against its critics.

In a truly free society, we enjoy the right to debate and mock those with unsavory views to prove them wrong in the court of public opinion. What we don't have the right to do is to prevent them from speaking entirely. Free speech is not valuable because it makes us comfortable. It is valuable because it protects the right to hear and challenge even the most offensive ideas. By threatening Yale funding for merely engaging in debate, Scott rejects our core American values.

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