NEWS

"Critics build nothing."
ROBERT MOSES '09 AMERICAN URBAN PLANNER

Year of budget cuts puts Lewis in the crosshairs of student criticism

BY OLIVIA WOO
STAFF REPORTER



GARRETT CURTIS / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
Pericles Lewis has nearly finished his fourth year as Yale College dean, one marked by undergraduates' frustrations about cuts to aid for low-income students. Lewis said he values talking with students and suggested the worst of the cuts may have passed.

After hearing Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis make his opening address to the first-year class last August, Siena Grouf '29 recalled that she had a "relatively positive" impression of the dean.

But "over the course of the year, that's really changed," she said last month. "It's really, really hard for me to be supportive of this person as a leader in education and for students, and I think that this past year has proved that."

Lewis has received mounting criticism from undergraduates since November, when he announced the replacement of two non-competitive summer grants for low-income students with one. He explained the change, which will substitute a Summer Experience Grant for the International Study Award and the Summer Experience Award, as a result of budgetary pressures created by the endowment tax hike coming this July.

Lewis said last month that the College has been trying to confine its decisions about budget tightening to this academic year "so that we don't have multiple years like this one where we're dealing with possible cuts."

"So we think that we're basically on target for our budget going forward," he added. "Overall, you know, we're managing to keep costs down by 5, 6, 7 percent without, I think, reducing the quality of the educational experience too much."

In March, Lewis confirmed in an interview with the News that Yale College funding for low-income students to store their belongings over the summer would be discontinued permanently, concluding a phase-out process unrelated to the endowment tax increase.

In an email to undergraduates sent hours after the News reported that the aid had been phased out, Yale College Council leaders wrote that the decision represented "another negative instance of the continued degradation of undergraduate support at Yale." Student leaders from the council and Dwight Hall at Yale responded swiftly with two programs intended to alleviate the costs of storing belongings over the summer.

Grouf said she has not been persuaded that these aid cuts "have to happen."

She said that "increased transparency" from Lewis about his decision-making could improve her perception of his leadership, and that her "primary problem" with the cuts was that "they really disproportionately impacted FGLI students," referring to first-generation, low-income students.

Grouf criticized both the changes to summer funding and storage aid for low-income students, as well as to the recent decision by the dean's office to reduce the staff of the Yale Sustainable Food Program from four to three. The latter change has left the future of the Food, Agriculture and Climate Change certificate beyond 2028 uncertain.

She said that she entered Yale under the understanding that the administration would create "at least a relatively equal experience for all the students, and it's become clear that that's just not a priority."

Lewis said that it is "a very high priority for me to make Yale a welcoming place for first-generation, low-income students."

"I realize that whenever there's a change, probably the people who, you know, people might be most impacted at the moment of a change might be the ones with fewer resources," he added. "I'm sorry that some people may not have a chance to hear me talk about these issues, but I care a lot about the students, and that's why I like doing the job."

During this year's Yale College Council elections, criticism of aid reductions for low-income students sat at the center of every active presidential campaign.

Incoming Yale College Council President Alex William Chen '28 said low-income students have taken the fall for the College's budget-tightening measures.

"Obviously, those decisions are being prompted by other headwinds, but at the end of the day the YCDO has chosen to place the burden of budgetary cuts on the core aspects of what an education at Yale looks like, and the most financially vulnerable students at Yale," Chen said, referring to Lewis' office. "Students are, pretty justifiably, extremely mad."

Students are not Lewis' only critics.

In April, professor emerita of history Glenda Gilmore wrote in a letter to the News that Lewis "seemed arrogant" when he recommended that students not "buy too much stuff" after confirming the summer storage aid phase-out. A week before Gilmore's letter, the dean apologized "for any perception" that he "might not recognize the effects" of the aid changes on students.

It was not the first time that Lewis had apologized for a statement that garnered backlash. Two years ago, Lewis apologized in a statement to the News for having written in a separate email to colleagues that non-Yale pro-Palestinian demonstrators had "a known history of violent confrontation with police."

Lewis acknowledged that student-administrator relations during the pro-Palestinian protests were difficult. He characterized this school year as "much easier" than the previous two with regard to conversations he has had with undergraduates "because we had a lot of tension around, you know, political matters in the previous two years that were much more stressful."

"Now that isn't to say that the challenges now aren't real challenges, but I think everybody in Yale College wants an excellent Yale College," Lewis said.

Abdel Abounabet '27 said that though there was frustration among undergraduates regarding Lewis' approach to the pro-Palestinian protests, the discontent this year is different.

"Back then," he said, students would have been unhappy with Lewis "if you're invested in terms of your advocacy or, or just your personal identity, in the Palestinian cause, which a lot of the student body was."

"Now, I feel like the hits are just, like, broadening," he continued. "And there's a larger group of people whose pockets are getting hit and they're starting to feel it."

Abounabet acknowledged, however, that his perception of Lewis is "not black and white," saying that the dean is trying to "manage our budget and see how best the money's allocated."

Lewis told the News that he values conversations with students who don't agree with "every single decision" that he has made.

"Sometimes we're making decisions that do have unfortunate impacts, but it's not out of a lack of care for students, and we're always very eager to hear from students and talk with them," Lewis said. "Although nobody likes cutting things, we're doing pretty well compared to how our peers are doing."

At times, Lewis has cited the actions of Yale's peer institutions in his own decisions behind budget reductions.

At the end of January, when discussing the combination of the two non-competitive summer grants, he noted that Yale College was "still guaranteeing one summer, which most of our peers don't do." Princeton and Harvard, he said, do not guarantee summer funding.

The merging of those grants also allowed for Yale to raise the income thresholds for a full tuition guarantee and a full cost of attendance guarantee, which the University announced in January. Harvard announced the adoption of similar income thresholds last March in a change that took effect for the current academic year, and Princeton adopted an even more generous financial aid policy last August.

Lewis said in January that he "would hate to see us under our peers in terms of our ability to help people during the year."

Weeks later, Lewis said that the size of the Yale College staff would decrease by roughly 7.5 percent, and added that some of those reductions had been realized through layoffs. Staff salaries, he said at the time, comprise his office's "biggest expense" outside of its $275 million financial aid budget.

The dean said in April that the size of the staff reduction ultimately eliminated between 5 and 7.5 percent of the Yale College workforce.

"But that's not a large reduction compared to peers, where you see like a 25 percent reduction or a 15 percent reduction or something like that," Lewis added. "I don't want to say that it's insignificant — obviously for anybody affecting the layoff or something that's very significant — but it's not like it's a massive change in the staffing levels."

When asked how his office approaches the trade-off between funding administrator salaries and funding direct payments to students — such as through summer storage support — Lewis said that he decides staffing levels based on how peer institutions "handle the same challenges that we do."

When discerning "the best way to support first-generation, low-income students," Lewis added, his office looks "around at peers. What's the best way to coordinate those kinds of services? So just trying to take a look at our peers and find the best way to make the best use of our resources that we can."

Chen said that this way of thinking sets a "dangerous precedent."

"I think part of the calculus is understanding what it is that actually makes Yale unique in comparison to these other institutions," Chen said. "It should be a model for what Yale can do better. I don't think it should be a model for what Yale can afford to give up."

Lewis will enter the final year of his first five-year term as Yale College dean this fall.

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With $40 million gift, School of Architecture eyes end to student debt

BY JONAS LOESEL
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The Yale School of Architecture hopes to eliminate future student debt, thanks to a $40 million matching commitment from billionaire donor Ed Bass '67 and his wife Sasha Bass.

According to Deborah Berke, the Architecture School's dean, the Basses' commitment will be announced to the school's alumni this month as the Bass Challenge: For each dollar donated to the school's financial aid endowment, the Basses will donate two dollars, up to $40 million dollars. If other donors contribute $20 million, the $60 million total will allow the School to eliminate student loans from its financial aid packages, Berke said in a Zoom interview in April.



KAREN LIN
The landmark matching commitment from megadonor Ed Bass '67 paves the way for the School of Architecture to eliminate student loans from its financial aid packages. The gift is the largest in the school's history.

"The goal is to get to a place where the School of Architecture is debt-free," Berke said, adding that the school is "actively and enthusiastically working" to raise funds for the Basses to match.

The Basses' commitment, which Yale has not yet publicly announced, would be the largest donation in the School's history, Berke also said. Bass did not respond to a request for comment.

Bass has previously donated to the School of Architecture, endowing a summer program in Rome and a professorship, though Berke said the $40 million commitment would be his first donation to the school's financial aid program.

In a Zoom interview last October, former University President Richard Levin GRD '72 '74 said Bass provided "more philanthropy than any living Yale donor."

According to a News analysis, Bass has donated at least $300 million to Yale since the 1990s, supporting the construction of Pauli Murray and Benjamin Franklin Colleges, the renovation of the President's House and the University's Science Hill development. In 2018, Bass made his largest Yale donation of $160 million dollars for the renovation of the Yale Peabody Museum, which reopened in 2024.

Levin also said that Bass also wants to do a major building renovation in the future, but Levin declined to offer specifics.

After graduating from Yale College, Bass entered the Yale School of Architecture in 1970 but left before completing his degree. Since leaving New Haven, he has become a philanthropist for a number of building projects in his hometown of Fort Worth, Texas. Bass also served on Yale's Board of Trustees from 2001 to 2013.

Forbes estimates Bass's net worth at $3 billion.

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