

LOOKING IN

“In America, you have the right to be stupid.” JOHN KERRY '66 AMERICAN POLITICIAN

As mission statement turns to old focus, McInnis says “it’s not a change”

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STAFF REPORTERS

Days after Yale narrowed its mission statement to focus on teaching and learning, University President Maurie McInnis said the updated language reaffirms a “core mission” that has long been in the faculty handbook and denied that the statement had been changed.

The revision, which headed a recent recommendation by the Committee on Trust in Higher Education, altered the language of Yale’s mission statement for the first time since 2016, when it was changed under then-president Peter Salovey GRD ’83 ’84 ’86 and committed Yale to “improving the world today and for future generations.”

The updated mission statement, which omits that commitment, was linked in McInnis’ end-of-year message to the Yale community on April 30, but she did not explicitly address the revision. When asked in a Wednesday interview with the News why she did not announce the change to the statement, McInnis replied, “it’s not a change.”

“That core mission has been in our faculty handbook for more decades than any of us can figure out,” she said. “We don’t know when it first entered the faculty handbook, but it’s always been there, and it’s never gone away. So it’s not a change.”

The new mission statement also excludes charges in the 2016 statement to educate “aspiring leaders worldwide” and promote “the free exchange of ideas in an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community of faculty, staff, students, and alumni.” It now reads: “Yale’s core mission is to create, disseminate, and preserve knowledge through research and teaching.”

In the current version of the faculty handbook, the section “Faculty Standards of Conduct” begins: “Yale University’s mission is to create, disseminate, and preserve knowledge through research and teaching.” This language, which matches almost verbatim the newly-refocused mission statement, appeared in the handbook dating back to at least 2014.

Yale’s “Mission Statement” webpage now states that Yale pursues its mission “through the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Yale College, and its graduate and professional schools, each with its own distinct contributions,” and displays the individual mission statements of the College, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and 12 graduate and professional schools in a drop-down list.

“I also discussed it with the trustees,” McInnis said, referring to the revision of the University-wide statement, “and we thought it was actually really clarifying to have the core mission and then the individual missions of all the schools. Because, of course, we are a large university with schools that live out the core mission in many different ways, and we thought it was very useful for that to be fully expressed.”

When asked whether the decision required the Yale Corporation’s approval, McInnis again dismissed the notion of a change.

“There was no change. It is a webpage,” McInnis said. “The trustees do not govern our webpages, and it was not a change, because this statement has been in our faculty handbook for decades.”

The Corporation endorsed a formal mission statement for the University in 1992, but expressions of mission have existed in various forms since Yale’s founding in 1701. That year, the Collegiate School — which became Yale University — was established so that “Youth may be instructed in the Arts & Sciences who thorough the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church & Civil State.”

Nearly three centuries later, in 1992, a search for the next University president prompted discussion about whether Yale should adopt a formal statement proclaiming its mission. Trustees at the time emphasized the centrality of such a statement to their decisions regarding presidential candidates, the News reported.

That year, the Yale Corporation approved a University-wide mission statement, which was intended to be reviewed every 10 years, according to a 1999 report by a committee chaired by then-Yale College Dean Richard Brodhead ’68 GRD ’70 ’72.

“Yale’s primary mission is to attract, educate and motivate a diverse group of the most highly talented men and women in order to advance and disseminate knowledge and to promote the scholarship, high character, values, and leadership which can be directed towards sustaining and improving society,” the 1992 Yale Corporation-endorsed statement read.

Over the course of the following decades, the mission statement underwent alterations. In 2015, it read simply: “Like all great research universities, Yale has a tripartite mission: to create, preserve, and disseminate knowledge.”

That sentence — which bears close resemblance to the recently-adopted language drawn from the

faculty handbook — appeared on Yale’s “Mission Statement” page above smaller text, which stated that Yale “seeks to attract a diverse group of exceptionally talented men and women from across the nation and around the world and to educate them for leadership in scholarship, the professions, and society.”

In 2016, that statement changed under Salovey, whose tenure as president had begun in 2013. “Yale is committed to improving the world today and for future generations through outstanding research and scholarship, education, preservation, and practice,” the 2016 statement read. “Yale educates aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society. We carry out this mission through the free exchange of ideas in an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community of faculty, staff, students, and alumni.”

In its April report, the Trust Committee criticized the decision to adopt this statement.

“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;’” the report reads. “These are all worthy goals. But they are not what makes a university a university.”

When asked on Wednesday whether the University was wrong to have expanded its mission statement in 2016, McInnis said, “No, I do not think — mission statements are a complicated thing, and what we have done is lifted up the core mission statement that has always been there and did not go away in 2016.”

Political science professor Steven Smith said the 2016 mission statement adopted under Salovey included “code” for social justice activism and protests.

“I think things began to change under his administration, and a lot of it was connected to things like George Floyd and COVID, these things, the coalescence of these things really did bring about a change in the campus environment,” Smith said, referring to Salovey. “It went way too far, it was allowed to go way too far, so I think we are resetting things.”

Salovey declined to comment on both the old and the new mission statements.

In 2019, Yale’s first general counsel and former trustee José Cabranes LAW ’65 wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal criticizing the new mission statement for focusing too

much on social issues and not enough on knowledge.

“American colleges and universities have been overwhelmed by a dangerous alliance of academic bureaucrats and student activists committed to imposing the latest social-justice diktats,” Cabranes wrote.

Salovey responded to the op-ed in a letter published days later, arguing that centuries-long precedent ties a university’s mission to its impact on the world. The president referenced the 1701 document that established Yale’s founding as a school that prepares its students for public service.

“Universities have always married scholarship with a hunger to see it applied to the world outside,” Salovey wrote. “As our mission statement makes clear, these goods stem from the free exchange of ideas, a profound commitment to scholarship and an interdependent, diverse community.”

Sociology professor Nicholas Christakis ’84 said he worked with other faculty to persuade members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in January 2020 to revert the mission statement’s focus back to knowledge.

In an email to the News, Christakis wrote that he and the group “tried very hard, against stiff opposition, to get Yale to commit to its mission — which, in my view, should have been, and now apparently is once again, the preservation, production and dissemination of knowledge.”

In his notes from a presentation to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Senate in 2020 obtained by the News, Christakis references Cabranes’ article and notes that many faculty did not know the mission statement had been changed.

According to his notes, Christakis thought that the period marked “a particular moment of anti-elitism and distrust of institutions in our society.”

“Universities have an important core mission,” he wrote. “I am worried that a number of actions we are taking, and not just this mission statement, may jeopardize some of the privileges that universities have historically rightly enjoyed.”

Since April 30, when the mission statement was changed from the language Christakis critiqued, current and former professors have had mixed reactions to the revision.

Former American Studies professor James Berger said he views the change as a rebuke of the Salovey-era statement.

Berger wrote in an email to the News that cutting phrases like “improving the world” from the mission statement “seems

to me a defensive gesture, a capitulation to the powerful forces that now are attacking the university, and the liberal arts/Humanities in particular.”

He said that Yale should aim for future generations “not just to know more” but to “live in a better, more just, more sustainable, more happy world.”

“We are not moving in that direction, and the timid tacticality of the revised mission statement moves us another step toward dissolution of all a university really should stand for,” Berger wrote, adding that he hopes a university dedicated to “real research, thinking, learning, and teaching will somehow come to improve the world in spite of itself.”

Smith, however, said that he thought the revision refocused the University’s mission statement appropriately.

The change, he said, was “obviously signalling to students and future applicants that ‘don’t tell us about what a protest leader you are, we are interested in your academics and what you have to contribute to the life of the mind,’ which is basically what the University is and should be about.”

In its April report, the Trust Committee emphasized the importance of clarity in an institutional mission, especially during a moment of increased political attention on and federal attacks against higher education.

“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,” the report reads.

While the committee wrote that the refocused mission statement was the basis for their other proposals to help rebuild trust, Smith questioned how much attention the language receives.

“I’m not sure any people really know what the statement is, but they have come to acquire this symbolic significance,” Smith said.

Four of seven students who spoke to the News the day the statement was revised said they had neither read nor paid much attention to the new mission statement.

McInnis will enter her third year as Yale President this fall.

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Seniors decry new mission statement as ‘directionless,’ ‘risk-averse’

BY SARA AGRAWAL
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As members of the class of 2026 were submitting their theses and studying for their last exams, Yale changed the mission statement that it had maintained throughout their college years.

On April 30, in accordance with recommendations from the Committee on Trust in Higher Education’s report, Yale removed from its mission statement the language of “improving the world today,” educating “aspiring leaders worldwide” and fostering “an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community.”

The new mission statement, narrowed down to focus on knowledge, now reads that “Yale’s core mission is to create, disseminate, and preserve knowledge through research and teaching.”

As they prepare to leave the University, six seniors who spoke with the News largely expressed disappointment in the change, although they recognized that it reflects the reality of a university they have found aversive of risk-taking.

“The new mission statement is very much intellectualism for intellectualism’s sake. I think it’s directionless, basically,” Jenny Jiang ’26 said in an interview with the News. “Yale has not necessarily accomplished what I think it should be doing as a university, and I think that the change in the mission statement reflects that.”

Sahana Kaur ’26, a political science and environmental studies

major, said in a phone interview that she was “disappointed” by the change in the mission statement. The old statement “encompassed the new version and went beyond,” she said, “and I think it reflected why many Yalies past and present, including myself, chose to attend the University.”

Cleber Redondo ’26 said in an interview with the News that he was “kind of happy” to hear that the mission statement had changed. He appreciated that the new statement was “more succinct,” while the old statement felt “less measurable.” Redondo, however, added that Yale, for its own benefit, should “expect a little bit more of its students” than the new mission statement does.

“Having Yale people do public office and get into these positions where they can actually preserve the institution is in Yale’s best interest,” he said.

Redondo added that he did not know the old mission statement, but it was “subconsciously there.” Yale characterized itself according to the old statement in the admissions process, he said, and its interest in improving the world reflected what distinguishes Yale from other Ivy League universities.

‘The functions of the University’

In its report, the Committee on Trust wrote that the goals articulated in the old statement of “improving the world today,” educating “aspiring leaders worldwide,” and fostering “an ethical, interdependent, and diverse community” were “worthy,” but that “they are not what makes a university a university.”

But the interviewed seniors said that public impact is inextricable from the purpose of the University.

Redondo said that the new mission statement provides the “barebones” of a university’s function and “could work for any university.” But he said that Yale’s new statement lacks a “greater purpose.”

Kaur said that while she understands that “knowledge is and sort of should be central to the functions of the University,” Yale stood out to her because it focused on “using knowledge for public benefits.” Kaur said that the old statement encompassed both knowledge creation and impact.

Kaur said “the way Yale’s mission was embodied in initiatives across the university was definitely one of the biggest reasons why I chose Yale,” citing initiatives like the Yale Sustainable Food Program that “made Yale the sort of holistic and distinctive institution.”

However, she said that she was disappointed that these programs have been stripped back during her time here. In April, the director of the Yale Sustainable Food Program was laid off due to the tightening of Yale’s budget, prompting outrage among students.

Other seniors also said the new mission statement reflected what they found to be a risk-averse culture at Yale.

Charlie Karner ’26.5 said that he had observed a change in the priorities of the University over his four years at Yale, citing Yale’s cuts to summer funding and the University’s “giving non-answers to student activism.”

Karner added that he thinks the change to the mission statement was a “sidestep in order to keep silently removing things that benefit students and benefit the world while saying, this is not what we do here.”

Jiang, a humanities major, said that many of her friends and professors care about positively impacting the world. She said that her professors encouraged her to apply the texts she read to current events. At the same time, she said that she was surprised to find that Yale felt largely “pre-professional.”

“I think as a whole university there wasn’t quite as much of that encouragement to participate as a member of the world,” Jiang said.

In a phone interview with the News, Anna Kaloustian ’26, a global affairs major, expressed “disillusion” with the service opportunities at Yale. Kaloustian worked with nongovernmental organizations in Lebanon before coming to Yale but struggled to find a “niche” within Dwight Hall.

“There are all these opportunities for impact, but I feel like they’re all kind of diluted” and not well-advised, she said.

Kaloustian, who hopes to work at the United Nations one day, called the fellowships available to students “amazing.” At the same time, she pointed to a “peer-pressure effect” that might contribute to her observation that “a lot of people come in being like, I want to change the world, and then just end up working in consulting.”

According to Kaur, part of the University’s impact on the world should come from “nurturing

talented young leaders and encouraging them to go into fields that they may not have otherwise considered.”

“But I think that coming to Yale has ironically made me more risk-averse,” Kaur said. “I now have this incredible opportunity to learn from and with some of the most brilliant minds in the world, but it could be so difficult to enter careers in social impact fields that I’m terrified of wasting this degree,” she said.

Nathaneo Johnson ’26, who co-founded the startup Series, said in a phone interview that “diversity of impact essentially comes from people pursuing unique paths and unique careers, which takes a lot of risk,” he said. But, he said, Yale is a “very risk-averse Ivy.”

Kaloustian said about the mission statement, “I don’t think it has much power” to change students’ goals. She said that the change in the mission statement must reflect a change that has already occurred in the University.

“But I do think it’s also, like, forward facing. And from now on, this is what the university is going to do,” she said.

Jiang said that she thought it was “ironic” that this change was designed to build public trust in the University.

“I think it might be doing the opposite in this case,” she said.

The report of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education was released on April 15.

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