OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

CORINNE COWAN

A Yale response to higher education's challenges

This summer, the Department of Education released a letter to American university presidents and boards asking them to describe their commitments to the American people. The letter asks six questions, which cover all the hot topics in higher education today: admissions and financial transparency, ideological pluralism and free speech.

How should Yale answer? Our response to the Department of Education must be a response that is unique to our identity. To start, we might draw on our historical commitment to the principles of a liberal arts education. Yale's identity as a liberal arts institution has long been connected to debates over the role of higher education. In the nineteenth century, well before the Committee on Trust in Higher Education released its 2026 report, Yale underwent a similar process of self-reflection.

The Yale Report of 1828 was a harsh rebuttal of the then-growing emphasis of higher education on professional and specialized education. Faculty of Yale College defended the value of a "classical education" in Greek, Latin and ancient literature against concerns over such a curriculum's impracticality. In this way, Yale served as a defense of general education over the teaching of specialized subjects.

Our path forward need not require that all students learn Latin, but it certainly can draw from the idea that the point of a liberal arts education is to produce well-rounded students. Yale's response to the Department of Education's letter will likely take the form of a public statement of our principles and thus must reflect the value that Yale places on a liberal arts education. Our answers to the letter's questions on the value of a Yale degree, adapting to the AI revolution and our research enterprise should stand as a testament to Yale's commitment to a general education.

Specifically, we ought to be careful about the Department of Education's concern with the "return value" of a degree. A Yale education does not easily lend itself to post-grad salary measures of value. We must not succumb to the pressures to define ourselves through our graduates' technical skills, noting that the usefulness of technical skills changes constantly in the age of AI.

The Woodward Report is another key part of Yale's identity. Though Yale's history of public cancellations and student censorship demonstrates how we fall short of the principles of free expression, a response to the Department of Education's questions that explains why free speech is intrinsically tied to a thriving liberal arts community will be more successful.

I imagine that one of the more difficult questions to answer will be the relationship between Yale and America. The Department of Education's letter explicitly calls for universities to emphasize their commitment to "put Americans, and American interests, first."

Don't mistake this idea for a primitive nativist sentiment. However global or multicultural Yale may be now, our origins are still distinctly American. Yale's early history was defined by a combination of Enlightenment ideals, Christian theology and spirited revolutionary sentiment — all key parts of American identity. Our liberal arts character is directly tied to the fact that America is a liberal, or free, society and one born out of the idea that citizens must be educated in order to effectively participate in a democracy. Even as Yale changed throughout the years — opening up to women, expanding financial aid and access — change was made out of respect for the American principles of equal opportunity and freedom.

As far as Yale's large population of international students and faculty goes, though? The Department of Education's letter makes it clear that they hope all universities will cut back on international students and faculty to prioritize Americans. To be honest, I have no idea how Yale should respond to these challenges. Suffice it to say that it is entirely within Yale's power to maintain similar numbers of foreign-born students and faculty while redoubling efforts to invest in America, through civic engagement and contributions across the country.

So a successful response might be grounded in Yale's identity as an American liberal arts institution — what else? When I think of Yale and similar institutions, I'm reminded of how our student culture sets us apart. Yale students tend to be more intellectually curious, interdisciplinary and open-minded. Unique elements of Yale culture — Directed Studies, the Yale Political Union, meal culture, the prevalence of double majoring — are a testament to our peculiarities.

While it's probably difficult for Yale's answers to reflect this, my hope is that our response will be infused with these aspects of student culture. Administrators should take into account this part of our identity when considering questions about academic rigor, free speech and AI policy.

Only time will tell whether or not Yale can survive the challenges that higher education faces today. But when President McInnis and the board of trustees answer the Department of Education's questions in the coming months, I hope that their response will look to the past and present of Yale's identity.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

NANCY GERTNER AND JOHN SHATTUCK

The best deal for Yale with Trump is no deal

Yale is the latest target of the Trump administration's scheme to coerce universities into surrendering their academic freedom. Trump is demanding that Yale give the Department of Justice broad review over Yale's admissions practices based on unproven and baseless charges of discrimination.

In response to the DOJ demand, Yale is reportedly considering a settlement. If it settles, Yale would become the most prominent university victim of Trump's "regulation by dealmaking."

The Trump administration's settlements with universities are nothing more than extortion. By making a deal, Yale would give up its constitutional, statutory and administrative rights, including academic freedom protected by the First Amendment, due process rights to contest the charges against it and procedural rights under federal civil rights laws enacted by Congress. In return, Yale would receive — at best — an unreliable promise of relief and the likelihood of further illegitimate administration demands. We know this from Trump's record with other universities and, more recently, a proposed rule by the Office of Management and Budget.

One of us is a former employment lawyer and former federal judge. A review of the administration's case outlined in its "letter of findings" makes it clear that the charges could not be more spurious. The letter presents what it describes as "statistical evidence of intentional discrimination" at the Yale medical school. The "evidence" consists of tables showing that median GPAs and MCAT scores were slightly lower among admitted Black and Hispanic students than among admitted students of other racial groups for the 2023, 2024 and 2025 incoming classes. The variations are minor; they cluster at the very highest range of the GPA and MCAT distributions, suggesting that all incoming students meet Yale's rigorous standards. The letter fails to show that these minor variations are anything but random. Nor does the government's analysis take into account other factors — such as household income, first-generation status, state of origin, prior publications, prior work experience or stated research interests — factors which are lawful under the Supreme Court's 2022 affirmative action decision.

Even if the Trumped-up charges against Yale had merit, it would be a grave mistake for Yale to surrender its procedural rights to fight them. First, under Title VI of the federal civil rights laws, the Justice Department is required to give Yale an "opportunity for hearing," a formal, trial-like proceeding before an independent administrative law judge. Second, it must provide an "express finding on the record" of any "failure to comply" with Title VI. Third, it must file a "full written report of the circumstances and grounds" for any termination or refusal of federal funding. Fourth — and above all — any finding of non-compliance with Title VI is subject to full judicial review.

Apart from the fact that the allegations against Yale are baseless, and that Yale has the right to contest them, settling now will not buy Yale peace. New rules proposed by the Office of Management and Budget would allow the administration to do indirectly what the courts have stopped it from doing directly: defunding research that does not comply with Trump's personal agenda. They would give Trump's appointees unbridled power to distribute government funds, rewarding universities that adopt Trump's agenda and punishing those that do not — censorship, pure and simple. The rules would transform Trump's ad hoc "regulation by dealmaking" into a binding, government-wide regulatory framework. Settlements like the one Yale is considering would be useless. Yale cannot bargain its way out of that future.

Even without the rules, Trump's record with university settlements shows that it does not honor the deals it makes. Columbia reached an initial agreement to restore research funding by acceding to Trump demands to change some of its academic policies. Then, several months later, Columbia had to make a $221 million payment in the final stages of the settlement.

One of us has seen this before at Central European University in Hungary a decade ago. An authoritarian government that disregards the rule of law cannot be trusted to keep an agreement. The government of Viktor Orban disregarded Central European University's Hungarian accreditation and demanded that it abolish or alter accredited programs on gender studies and Hungarian history. When the university refused, Orban forced it out of Hungary, an action later declared by the European Court of Justice to have violated Hungarian and European Union law.

Yale has a longstanding reputation for defending academic freedom and the rule of law. We know; we are proud graduates of the Yale Law School. We urge the University to stand up for these values by recognizing that the best deal it can make with the Trump administration is no deal at all.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

HANNAH OWENS PIERRE

The truth about Yale's settlement talks

Amidst news that Yale is seeking a deal with the Trump administration, many Yale students and faculty have reacted with outrage. How dare Yale's leaders "sell out to the billionaire class" and capitulate to an evil administration, they ask.

What is left out of these critics' statements is what Yale's leaders are fighting against. Let's be clear: The Trump administration is not attacking Yale for no reason. There is a specific charge against the University. The administration claims that Yale is discriminating against students on the basis of race in its application process in violation of federal law, namely Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

The evidence in support of this proposition is strong. As the Department of Justice cites in its Letter of Findings, numerous documents from the Yale School of Medicine mention race as a criterion for evaluating candidates, both implicitly and explicitly, despite the Supreme Court ruling that racial-conscious admissions programs are unlawful.

Even more damning, the DOJ finds that "Yale's use of race resulted in a Black applicant being as much as 29 times higher odds of getting an interview for admission than an equally strong Asian applicant with similar academic credentials."

As a result, Black applicants appear to have an advantage in medical school admissions. This advantage is compounded by the fact that the medical school's admissions data shows that in 2025, incoming Black and Hispanic students' median GPAs were roughly 0.10 points lower than incoming Asian students' median GPA. Their median MCAT scores were 5 and 6 percentile points lower, respectively, than those of white and Asian students. Notably, this disparity has hardly changed since 2022, prior to the Supreme Court ruling overturning affirmative action.

While these aggregate differences do not prove discrimination on their own, in conjunction with the context of suspected race-conscious admissions at Yale, the thesis becomes likely.

Moreover, these are not mere "minor variations" as some would like you to believe. To put these numbers into perspective, imagine if your admission to Yale was contingent on getting a 4.0 and 36 on the ACT, while your classmate could get in with a 3.90 and a 31. In this scenario, one applicant clearly has an unfair advantage.

Given this context, it is no wonder that the DOJ is going after Yale's admissions standards. If Yale were to instead grant male medical school applicants preferential treatment on the basis of women being overrepresented in medical school, in violation of Title IX, practically everyone would acknowledge that this is legally prohibited. Admissions cannot assign applicants different standards because of their gender or because of their race.

It's also no wonder why the actual reason the DOJ has gone after Yale has received little coverage, with outrage instead aimed at the very idea of agreeing with the Trump administration on any issue. Organizations like Indivisible claim that negotiations are about "academic freedom" and "free speech," while not even mentioning the real issue at hand. It seems it is easier to be generically anti-Trump than it is to be pro-affirmative action, especially after it was struck down by the Supreme Court.

Those who defend race-conscious admissions argue that it leads to better healthcare outcomes, as patients have better outcomes with diverse doctors. To the extent that this is true, it doesn't address the legal concerns behind the practice, which ought to be Yale's primary focus.

Putting aside these concerns, however, it is also not a compelling argument in favor of different standards for applicants. Ending preferential treatment in admissions doesn't mean that there will be no minority doctors, it simply means that they will be placed in medical schools that match their test scores.

Besides, we must recognize that admissions to colleges necessarily involve tradeoffs. Prioritizing a minority applicant who doesn't meet admissions standards means turning away a white or Asian applicant who does. The fundamental issue here is one of fairness.

Keep in mind that these white and Asian applicants enhance diversity in a plethora of ways, such as through socioeconomic status. Indeed, a study in the Journal of Political Economy Microeconomics found that race-conscious universities are more likely to admit upper-class minorities, at the expense of less economically privileged applicants. So ending race-conscious admissions does not mean doing away with the benefits of diversity altogether.

It is time for Yale students and political activists to stop misrepresenting the nature of Yale's negotiations with the Trump administration and admit a simple truth: Race-conscious admissions programs were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, and if Yale is engaged in this practice, which evidence suggests it is, it must reform its admissions standards.

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