FROM THE FRONT

"I'm never going to be the guy who is able to robotically go about my business and not change my expression or show any emotion."
BEN SHELTON AMERICAN TENNIS PLAYER

Backlash to trustee election change spans political aisle



Martin Peralta / Head Photography Editor
Five years after the Yale Corporation eliminated the petitioning process for nominating alumni fellow candidates, the Buckley Institute and the Endowment Justice Collective are still advocating for a more democratic process.

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Corporation election changes

According to the University by-laws, the Yale Corporation must include 10 successor trustees, six alumni fellows, as well as the University president and the governor and lieutenant governor of Connecticut. Successor trustees are chosen by current board members, while alumni fellows are elected by the alumni body.

In May 2021, Catharine Bond Hill GRD '85, a former senior trustee announced in a message to alumni a change in the election process of alumni fellows.

"The Board of Trustees has determined that the petition process to become a candidate in the Alumni Fellow election no longer serves the best interests of the university," she wrote.

Prior to that announcement, hopeful candidates who collected 3 percent of eligible alumni signatures would qualify for a nomination. Additionally, the Yale Alumni Association's nominating committee could select alumni for the ballot.

After Bond Hill's announcement, candidates could only reach the ballot through the Alumni Association's nominating committee.

Bond Hill emphasized that, as fiduciaries of the University, trustees "must represent the interests of the university above their own or those of any backers." She cited "cause-based elections" as a reason for the change to the election process.

After that announcement, alumni reacted with ire, the News reported at the time.

Donald Glascoff Jr. '67 and Victor Ashe '67, who reached the 2021 ballot through petitioning, sued Yale for violating an amendment to the University charter. The lawsuit failed to reach the Connecticut Supreme Court in March after losses at the district and appellate levels.

The Endowment Justice Collective slams 'insulation'

The Yale Endowment Justice Collective, a student advocacy group focused on the ethical allocation of University funds, has repeatedly called for a more democratic process in electing members of the Yale Corporation since the 2021 change.

In 2023, the group campaigned for a referendum organized by the Yale College Council that called for the democratization of the Corporation's election process and expanded voting rights for students, faculty and staff.

That campaign has since evolved into "Democratize Yale," a coalition of students, staff, faculty and Yale alumni, which hosted its first teach-in on Sept. 1 involving over 300 Yale community members.

According to its website, the coalition is demanding for changes to how Yale's Board of Trustees is selected and operated, arguing that the University should give its broader community a greater role in governance and make trustee proceedings more transparent and accessible.

Among other demands, the organization also demanded an end to Yale's settlement negotiations with the Department of Justice so the University can fully defend admissions policies at Yale College, Yale Law School and the Yale School of Medicine, which the Justice Department has investigated.

Isabel Matos '28, a speaker at the teach-in on behalf of the EJC, expressed frustration with the Corporation's "refusal" to listen to the 2023 referendum, saying that "this silence and secrecy is no accident." The trustee system is designed to be an "insulation" from the broader Yale community, Matos told the crowd.

The Buckley Institute criticizes 'handpicked' process

On April 24, the Buckley Institute released a petition calling on Yale to restore the petitioning process for prospective alumni fellows.

Buckley describes itself on its website as "the only organization dedicated to promoting intellectual diversity and free speech at Yale" and as "a home for enlightened conservative thought."

The petition, addressed to McInnis and the board of trustees, lists three demands: to restore the petitioning process for prospective alumni fellow candidates, to allow candidates "to explain and discuss their approach to Yale governance" and to release the vote counts of alumni fellow elections.

Yale's information page on alumni fellow elections calls it "a long-standing practice" that candidates do not campaign but, rather, "stand for election solely based on the information included in the official election materials."

"You have made restoring public trust in higher education an important priority for the university," Buckley's petition reads, referring to the April report from the Committee on Trust in Higher Education. "But how can Yale expect to earn back the trust of the public if it does not even seem to trust its own alumni?"

On Aug. 26, Buckley sent its petition to McInnis and the other members of the Yale Corporation with over 1,100 signatures from alumni, students and faculty, according to its website.

Buckley Institute Founder and Executive Director Lauren Noble '11 said through a spokesperson in an emailed statement to the News that without the petition candidate process and letting candidates discuss their views, "what is left is only the illusion of an election, one in which candidates are handpicked and alumni voters do not know why they are casting a ballot."

Mór Szepesi '27, a social director for the Buckley Program and former president of the Yale Political Union, said in a phone interview that a petitioning process ensured that people with less represented perspectives could attempt to be elected.

"The general principle of many of the organizations dedicated to free speech is that we need transparency and we need various opinions highlighted," Szepesi said.

He added that when processes are changed in a way that seems to diminish transparency, "especially in this case, when it comes to selecting people in positions of power," it might seem that the University is cherrypicking people with particular perspectives to be trustees.

Szepesi said that he acknowledged that "certain people" might understand the University and its priorities better than others.

"And sometimes Yale students aren't the ones who should be voting on everything," he said.

Chin, the EJC organizer, wrote to the News that the alumni petition process, paired alongside democratic elections, would incentivize engagement in open dialogue between future trustees and the broader Yale community "rather than lock decision-making behind closed doors."

The Buckley petition noted that the elimination of the petitioning process for alumni fellow elections "garnered criticism from across the political spectrum."

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Mission statement, test policy, orientation see changes

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weeks after the report's release — while others inspired "restatements of principles" and many were "going to just take awhile to implement."

In altering its mission statement, the University axed language about making the world a better place, diversity and educating "aspiring leaders worldwide." The new statement, which matches nearly verbatim the one suggested in the committee report, says Yale's role is to create, disseminate and preserve knowledge. The report framed the suggested change as the basis of the rest of its recommendations, though McInnis told the News in May that the mission statement did not undergo a change.

"There's an emphasis that was always there, but is now more explicit, that this is an educational institution above all," English professor and report co-author David Bromwich '73 GRD '77 said.

McInnis framed the statement change as a reaffirmation of a "core mission" that has been in the faculty handbook for decades. She also pointed to individual schools' mission statements, some of which still emphasize ideas from the pre-trust report mission statement.

"The mission statement is a largely symbolic issue," Gage said. "But symbols really matter and statements of purpose really matter."

Some of the committee's other recommendations have been partially adopted, and others have been referred by McInnis to separate committees. She has not explicitly outlined steps to address the committee's calls to "Build trust with the trustees."

Earlier this month, first years were required to attend an orientation event regarding the University's role in democracy, hosted by Gage and Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis. Gage said the sessions marked the beginning of implementing the committee's recommendation to mandate civic education "that would reach every first-year undergraduate student on a regular basis."

Gage said the mandatory sessions were a good start and that she wanted to expand the program.

The trust committee also recommended in its report that Yale reform undergraduate admissions and financial aid, describing both processes as opaque and breeding distrust in the University. The report called on Yale admissions to publicly adopt a minimum standard of academic achievement for prospective applicants.

McInnis referred the committee's recommendations to the Presidential Council on Yale College Admissions, which in May reinstated the requirements for undergraduate applicants to submit either the SAT or ACT.

Gage said she would still like to see a minimum score posted publicly.

"That is both for the purposes of legibility, purposes of messaging about what really matters the most to the institution," Gage said. "And it's also to save a lot of people who are spending a lot of time on these complicated applications the time and energy and emotional investment of an application that probably isn't going to succeed."

Bromwich said the material advertising Yale admissions had "underemphasized just how competitive it is."

Like the one focused on testing in admissions, many of the trust committee's recommendations have ended up in committees of their own. McInnis asked Secretary and Vice President for University Life Kimberly Goff-Crews '83 LAW '86 to form a committee to tackle social media guidelines and tasked the Committee on Teaching, Learning and Advising with addressing grade inflation.

Committee co-chair Julia Adams wrote in Inquisitive Magazine earlier this month that some of the report's "thornier recommendations are bound to raise major challenges," particularly the recommendation to "open minds."

The committee suggested Yale undertake initiatives to enhance "open and critical debate on campus" that are "anchored in the university's fundamental academic mission" and that Yale commit resources to parts of the University "who lead demonstrably open processes of intellectual renewal," suggesting a range of processes including "institutional models not yet tried."

"This is complicated terrain, because we can agree — and we did agree — that as we said, free teaching and scholarship requires contestation, and we also agreed that it can be difficult to foster that," Adams said in a Thursday interview. "And it isn't wholly clear which strategy might work best at Yale."

This recommendation may require experimentation, she said.

What comes next?

Some of the authors who spoke to the News said they hope Yale tackles the report's recommendations that concern the classroom.

In its report, the committee called for a blanket no-device policy in classes, grading reform and increased rigor in academics. Currently, professors are able to establish their own policy on device usage in class. Gage acknowledged that not all the specifics of their proposals are likely to become official University policy.

She said she would be "surprised" if Yale adopted the 3.0 mean GPA the Committee recommended, saying that this policy would mark "a pretty radical shift." Bromwich also said he does not expect any short-term action on grade inflation from the University.

Sarath Sanga LAW '14, a law professor and trust committee member, said that "no one really defends the status quo" for grading norms but "there remains significant disagreement as to how to proceed."

He said that "what's stunting anything from proceeding" is the need for "a critical mass of universities to move together."

"If one person moves, and nobody updates, this is the problem," he said. "We're just penalizing our own students."

That demand, according to Sanga, is an "impossible ask" but critical for finding a solution to the issue of grade inflation.

Adams, a sociology professor, said she is currently implementing a no-tech policy in her classes this fall, which she said has taken some adjustment but is "going wonderfully." Bromwich said he has banned devices in his classrooms for years.

In a May interview, McInnis told the News that she did not know when to expect news on admissions policy.

"I suspect, since it took quite a while for public trust in higher education to fall, it will take quite a while for it to be rebuilt, especially in a politically fraught moment like the one we're in," Gage said.

The four authors that spoke with the News expressed optimism about the conversations their report sparked.

"It seems to have really struck a nerve both on campus and off," Sanga said.

For Adams, the report has already succeeded as it has prompted "important soul-searching at Yale, but also more broadly."

On Wednesday, McInnis will speak at an American Enterprise Institute event titled "Restoring Trust in Higher Education."

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