# OPINION

STAFF COLUMNIST

**HOWARD BLOCH**

## A bold proposal for Yale

American universities are in trouble, and there is much pressure from the outside to change. Unless you are so conservative as to believe that things are fine as they are and no change is needed, then why not consider changing from within rather than from without? The time has come to radically rethink the curriculum and structure of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, whose mission, according to a statement adopted in 2020 by the FAS Senate, "is to preserve, advance, and transmit knowledge through inspiring research, teaching, and art."

Let me put forth a strong thesis: Yale ought to reassess its curriculum and the departmental structure that organizes the transmission of knowledge along the lines of a global core that would put us at the forefront of American universities and address many of the issues that currently inhibit us from being all we can be.

Such a curriculum would work across departmental lines and even schools, and would be structured by multiple perspectives upon important issues that prepare students for life in the twenty-first century — such as family, religion, community, justice, ethics, politics, the good and bad uses of technology, among other topics. Such a project would encourage civil discourse among faculty who would be encouraged to consider what and how they teach and how their teaching intersects with other areas of inquiry.

The shared nature of a certain number of core required courses for students in their first two years would work towards the making of community via intellectual means rather than through class, religion, gender, race or ethnicity, which have served to weaken rather than strengthen a sense of shared belonging.

There are certain moments at which universities are called upon to think about purpose: what they do and how they do it. This was the case during the Interwar years when a few institutions — Columbia, the University of Chicago, St. Johns — established a core curriculum. It was again the case after World War II when the research university took a quantum leap forward and when colleges thought about the shape and methods of undergraduate education.

Harvard took the lead with its celebrated General Education in a Free Society, also known as the Harvard Redbook, beginning in 1945. My own alma mater, Amherst College, followed with a radical rethinking of the goals of a liberal education along with the means of achieving those goals. Yale in 1946 took a small but significant step in the direction of curricular reform with Directed Studies, which originally offered about 10 percent of first- and second- year students a curated constellation of courses thought to be necessary for future leaders of the free world. All of these programs along with many others placed the rethinking of curriculum at the center of evolving institutional identity.

It is time for Yale again to take the lead among American universities and to rethink in full the shape and contents of its undergraduate education. This is a golden opportunity to assess what belongs in the curriculum and what does not, as well as to reorganize how a university like Yale is structured.

> IT IS TIME FOR YALE AGAIN TO TAKE THE LEAD AMONG AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES AND TO RETHINK IN FULL THE SHAPE AND CONTENTS OF ITS UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION.

The college is currently governed by a departmental system, which is thought to be a good way in which to manage university resources. Each department has its budgetary allocation and is responsible for staying within budget.

Yet, this organizational model has become unfair and outmoded. Some departments have developed private resources not available to others. Current departmental structure does not best articulate what an education is or should be today or will be tomorrow. Departments are defined by disciplines, and disciplines have changed over time. Foreign literature departments grouped along national lines once corresponded to the colonial empires of the late nineteenth century, while the literatures of every area of the globe have more in common than the particular languages that separate them by department. Almost every department in the humanities teaches some version of history, uses the visuals of art history and has adapted to the demands of digital media and artificial intelligence.

Departments are not agile bodies. They are ruled by a certain self-reproducing defensive inertia that leads them to respond neither to developments within the field they originally designated nor to changing relations between fields.

New areas of inquiry have emerged such as Film and Media Studies, which are not so hidebound by nationalist interests. The Humanities Program has consolidated disciplinary differences in a way that also reflects student interest in studying across departmental lines. Nor is the Humanities Program unique. Yale has spawned major programs and certificates — Mathematics and Philosophy, Ethics, Politics and Economics, Human Rights Studies, Translation Studies. These stretch departmental bounds and correspond to educational pairings within a world of disciplines changing internally and in relation to each other.

We are in some ways unique, given our strengths in the humanities, social sciences, and natural and physical sciences. The consequences of avoiding self-examination are clear: from my observations, science departments which did not reorganize some three or four decades ago to reflect the revolutionary change in the relation between biology and chemistry, and even physics, did not do well.

A response to the current crisis that begins with the matter of education and not government funding, free speech, institutional neutrality, or international diversity offers a chance for those involved in the enterprise of education — faculty with some student input — to seize the initiative in redefining ourselves instead of simply reacting to attacks from without. It is something that should have been undertaken decades ago.

It is not too late for Yale to do something radical that might also, by taking charge of the thing we know and do best, do more than anything else I can imagine to restore public trust in higher education.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

**DANIEL MARTINEZ HOSANG**

## How a talented alum helped a right wing grift site mischaracterize our AAUP meeting

Earlier this month, a colleague sent me a story from Campus Reform, a right-wing website I know well. As someone who studies the strategies and politics of the contemporary right, I am familiar with its usual fare: breathless "exposés" of campus decadence, liberal overreach and the alleged persecution of conservatives. The formula is predictable. But this particular story stopped me cold.

It claimed to cover a recent meeting of our American Association of University Professors chapter at Yale, in which faculty from several other universities joined us over Zoom to discuss the settlements that the Trump administration had sought to impose on their institutions. A core tenet of academic freedom is protection from unlawful government coercion, a principle that faculty across the political spectrum hold dear. The meeting was widely publicized and open to all, with nearly 70 professors in attendance on Zoom and in person.

Yet the Campus Reform story presented the meeting as a clandestine event with a sinister agenda. The headline read, "Yale AAUP leads panel to prepare for a Trump admin-led Title VI investigation."

> YET THE CAMPUS REFORM STORY PRESENTED THE MEETING AS A CLANDESTINE EVENT WITH A SINISTER AGENDA.

That description was entirely false. There was no discussion of preparing for a Title VI investigation.

But the real surprise came from the accompanying image. The site appeared to have taken a photograph originally published by the News, where I was shown standing at a podium introducing the discussion, and replaced it with an altered, possibly AI-generated version.

In this fabricated scene, the room was dimly lit and on the projection screen appeared several AI-created graphics, including an image of Donald Trump and a slide that displayed the fabricated title text from the headline. Nothing in the picture was real.

Much of the article mirrored the News' story and included quotations invented, mischaracterized or taken out of context, as well as false claims. There was no mention that the image was AI-generated. Readers are left to believe that Campus Reform had been present at the meeting and conducted original reporting.

That alone would have been strange enough. But what truly caught my attention was the byline. The author is a recent Yale graduate who wrote for the News, won a major prize from the English Department and interned for several prominent journals. By every measure, she had the beginnings of a serious literary career.

So how does someone like that end up attaching her name to a distorted, AI-padded article on a right-wing propaganda site?

When I attend conservative conferences for my research, I often ask participants what drew them to these movements. Their stories are usually about experience and belief. But this case felt different and far more transactional. It reveals how wealthy outside groups on the right are reshaping the political terrain of higher education.

The literary, news and media worlds are contracting. For young writers, breaking in often means years of unpaid internships, endless pitching and uncertain prospects. Campus Reform, by contrast, offers something more immediate. The website is a project of the Leadership Institute, founded in 1979 by right-wing political operatives, which now brings in nearly $45 million annually from deep-pocketed conservative donors.

Campus Reform's business model appears simple: scrape stories from student newspapers and university press releases, attach modified images with menacing faces and darkened rooms and repackage them as evidence of "liberal bias." Writers are not expected to report or investigate. Campus Reform will pay them and give them a byline simply for feeding the machine.

To be sure, there is a long tradition of conservatives who came of age at Yale, including many prominent figures in the current administration.

> WHAT LOOKS LIKE A SILLY LITTLE CAMPUS SIDESHOW OF STUDENTS CHURNING OUT MANUFACTURED STORIES FOR CLICKS AND DONOR DOLLARS IS ACTUALLY A MICROCOSM OF A BROADER RIGHT-WING PROJECT.

Historically, conservative students might have gravitated to a right-leaning journal, a legislative office, or a think tank, hoping to develop an intellectual foundation for their ideas. That is not the legacy in which Campus Reform operates.

Conservative strategists seem to understand that their agenda on higher education, including defunding universities, intimidating international students and privatizing loans, has little public support.

What remains for them is spectacle. They rely on the invention of enemies, the creation of crises and the fabrication of offenses that can be used to mobilize outrage. It is fair to call it a grift, not only because it exploits young writers but because it deceives the movement's own donors and audience, feeding them falsehoods and generating illusions as if they were news. Attaching such stories to a byline associated with a lauded Yale English major provides a credibility such an article would otherwise lack.

I laughed at the AI version of myself standing in a darkened room before a fake slide with a fake headline. But the laughter stops quickly. That same week, a professor at Rutgers was reportedly fleeing the country with his family after receiving death threats following a smear campaign by the local Turning Point USA chapter.

The grift is not harmless. What looks like a silly little campus sideshow of students churning out manufactured stories for clicks and donor dollars is actually a microcosm of a broader right-wing project. It is a politics that has abandoned ideas altogether and replaced them with simulation.

And for one Yale graduate, that is apparently where a writing career now begins.

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