OPINION

STAFF COLUMNIST

HANNAH OWENS PIERRE

What academic freedom is

Academic freedom is among the demands listed by the popular Democratize Yale movement, which is supported by the Yale chapter of the American Association of University Professors, or AAUP, an organization which was founded in part to advance academic freedom.

But what is academic freedom? The AAUP provides a sensible definition, calling it the freedom of faculty to "investigate and discuss the issues in their academic field, and to teach and publish findings without interference."

The AAUP's actions, however, reveal a clear agenda. It invokes academic freedom to justify abandoning its 110-year tradition of political neutrality and endorsing only Democrats in the midterm elections. It invokes the same principle to defend a University of Michigan professor who used his position as Faculty Senate chair to rail against the war in Gaza, even though institutional neutrality discourages university officials from using their positions to advance political causes. The AAUP increasingly seems to conflate academic freedom with the freedom to engage in left-wing political activism.

But true academic freedom is decidedly politically neutral. It defends the right of faculty members of all political affiliations to speak freely. It defends, for example, the freedom of Erika Christakis, a former Yale professor who was pushed out of the classroom for publishing an email urging students to stop freaking out about offensive Halloween costumes. It defends the freedom of Bret Weinstein, a former Evergreen State professor who was likewise forced to resign over his refusal to comply with the university's "Day of Absence," during which white people were asked to stay off campus.

Such political neutrality requires institutional neutrality, or a commitment by universities to refrain from taking political stances. The AAUP, however, has rejected this principle, arguing that institutional neutrality is "neither a necessary condition for academic freedom nor categorically incompatible with it."

But academic freedom cannot meaningfully exist without institutional neutrality. Professors are hardly free to think, speak and teach independently when their universities signal which views are acceptable, endorse particular political orthodoxies and create an environment in which faculty fear professional consequences for expressing dissenting opinions.

Academic freedom requires neutrality, not only in public statements, but also in hiring and evaluation practices. Faculty are required to provide diversity, equity and inclusion statements during hiring, evaluation and promotion in many universities. This was explicitly the case in Yale's Psychology, Molecular Biophysics, Biochemistry and Biomedical Engineering departments prior to April 2025.

These statements are a way to ideologically screen candidates who are not sufficiently progressive. At Texas Tech, for instance, a candidate for the biology department was red-flagged because he "mentioned that DEI is not an issue because he respects his students and treats them equally." While mandatory DEI statements have declined, 11 percent of full-time faculty job advertisements still contain them, while 37 percent signal that a commitment to DEI is valued in the hiring process.

DEI statements violate academic freedom by requiring professors to endorse a liberal orthodoxy to obtain or retain employment. They punish even those who exhibit no bias but fail to demonstrate sufficient ideological conformity. Yet the AAUP, the alleged bastion of academic freedom, advocates in favor of these exclusion criteria also.

> BUT TRUE ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS DECIDEDLY POLITICALLY NEUTRAL.

Finally, academic boycotts, in which organizations or universities refuse to work with targeted scholars or institutions, violate both institutional neutrality and academic freedom. Boycotts of Israel have grown prominent in recent years.

These boycotts impede faculty's ability to choose collaborators without institutional repercussions. In 2005, the AAUP agreed that academic boycotts "suppress freedom," and categorically opposed the tactic. Yet in 2024, in response to the boycotts of Israel, the AAUP reversed that decision, approving systemic boycotts and once again threatening the freedom of faculty to speak their minds.

Make no mistake: Academic freedom is a worthy end. Discussing contentious ideas honestly and openly in a classroom setting prepares students to tackle difficult conversations in the real world, and promotes the discovery of truth.

But faculty members can only do so in a climate that promotes intellectual diversity and free expression, not one that stifles it in the name of ideological purity. If the AAUP truly cares about academic freedom, I urge the organization to once again speak out against DEI statements, academic boycotts and efforts to kick out professors who express controversial ideas.

By all means, continue advocating for academic freedom, but do so purely for the sake of freedom, not for a political agenda.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

VIOLET CHIN

Bad feminists

There is a moment in Fleabag I think about often. The protagonist — who remains unnamed throughout the show, and hence is referred to by the audience as "Fleabag" — and Claire, her wealthy older sister, sit down to watch a feminist lecture series. The two women are there out of obligation, having been given tickets by their father. The speaker begins her lecture, and asks the audience:

"Please raise your hands if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called 'perfect body.'"

Fleabag and Claire immediately raise their hands. They then look around to find that no other woman has a hand raised. They get some bad looks, breathe in the awkward silence, and slowly lower their hands as they slump down in their seats, trying not to be seen. Fleabag turns to Claire and whispers in her ear, "We are bad feminists."

This moment reminds me of my own experience with feminism, especially at Yale.

It is not an uncommon occurrence at this school to find yourself in a seminar, discussing some form of feminism, or at least addressing the impact of female oppression in any text or history. The educational opportunity at this school results in a population, by and large, highly aware of the existence of a patriarchy and its variety of pervasive impacts both historically and in the contemporary. Moreso, with the progressive makeup of Yale, I would posit that most Yale students would identify as feminists. Thus, when a conversation focuses on feminism, perhaps we assume we can only learn so much, thinking of ourselves as an educated few, who can, of course, grasp the concept of socially institutionalized subjugation.

Now, I am not accusing the average Yale student of thinking they are some kind of master of feminism. Most of the students I have met here seem reasonable enough to concede that they have biases under the patriarchy. Even so, it seems that when it comes to feminism on campus, ideas evolve faster than practices.

In a seminar, the idea of body positivity might be met with nodding heads, with each student understanding that thinness is a standard pushed onto women as a form of control. After all, if women are busy thinking about their looks, and if their value in society is intrinsically tied to their beauty alone, they will not have motivation to show up and vote, to get an education, or to dismantle the patriarchy.

Nonetheless, while in the dorm, we tighten our corsets for Halloweekend — joking that it's better if we can't breathe. In the dining hall, I find myself eavesdropping: A girl laughs that her friend has a skinny plate. I look over to see a plate filled with cucumbers and lettuce. Her friend throws her head back and laughs that she has been so fat today. Later that night at Yale University, when crowds line the street outside whatever frat is throwing, young women push to the front of the line, dressed to the nines, hoping to charm whichever guys are at the door into letting them in.

When feminism seems to be divided into the academic and everyday scenes, then feminist progress on campus will evolve at two different speeds, between two different spheres. In the academic, idealistic space students may feel the need to present their intellectual capabilities, proving that they can understand feminist and anti-oppressive theory. Yet, in the everyday or in practice, there is no pressure to showcase knowledge. We find comfort in fitting in with the patriarchal status quo.

It is this phenomenon that makes it so the same frat guy who spent all night at the door trying to enforce the ratio of hot girls to guys can wake up the next Monday and discuss the impact of colonial beauty standards in the modern world. And in myself, it is this phenomenon that never lets me go to class without makeup on.

So, is Yale's feminism a fraud? If we think ourselves great feminists, and even engage in academic discussion, but can't help but recreate the patriarchy around us on campus, perhaps it is — and maybe transparency is the real solution.

I find myself thinking about that moment from Fleabag all the time because it points to a sense of honesty I wish I had. Even if it was embarrassing, I wish I, like Fleabag and Claire, could admit to a sense of deep internalized misogyny. I wish in a seminar we could admit the urge to be skinny. I wish we could see the two sides of Yale's feminism side by side, and get students to recognize the need for change.

Because the illusion is intoxicating: we are simultaneously smart, well-educated feminists and pretty enough to cut the line at Chi Psi. But it is just that, an illusion. Maybe, just as Fleabag whispered, we are "bad feminists," but perhaps, if we say that out loud, we can begin to change.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

GIUSEPPE DIMASSA

Universal pass-fail grading

Yale's grading schema has failed.

To the University's credit, other universities' schemes have failed, too. While the underlying objective of grades — measure and report academic learning and demonstrated competence — is defensible, three overlapping institutions have destroyed grades' utility.

The first is the U.S. News & World Report Rankings. Graduate schools, including law, medical and business schools, are ranked in part based on the unweighted, raw median GPA of the incoming class. Schools have therefore become obsessive about GPA metrics. For an extreme example, take a look at the above graph. It is a map of GPA against LSAT scores for applicants to the George Washington University Law School. God forbid a student take a hard class or have a hard semester.

The second institution that broke grades and GPA, in my view, are humanistic departments. The departments with the clearest professional outcomes — Mathematics, Economics, etc. — also have the hardest grade curves. There seems to be a tradeoff between employment prospects and the department GPA that students are willing to tolerate.

Finally, other universities broke grades! If graduate schools and rankings reward simple GPA metrics, every university has an incentive to keep their school and students competitive.

Why not implement a grade curve, perhaps in conjunction with similarly prestigious schools? The most obvious problem is the prisoner's dilemma. The first school that begins to re-inflate grades would place its graduates in more prestigious firms, graduate schools and fellowships. Princeton, for historical reasons, has already rejected the grade cap. Who wants to sacrifice their spot in Wharton's incoming MBA class for the benefit of some New Jersey Tiger? Even beyond the elite tier of colleges, universities inflating grades would see their graduates benefit. Recall that the USNWR rankings prioritize raw grades, not rigor- or prestige-adjusted grades.

Furthermore, not all classes are equally difficult. A class-by-class grade curve would punish students for taking difficult classes with excellent peers. Alternatively, department-wide curves would encourage students to continue "hunting" for the individual classes, regardless of department, likely to have the most generous grade curve. Yale's emphasis on interdisciplinary, humanistic education would compound this problem. I am confident that a clever Humanities major could still pick-and-choose the optimal class combination for avoiding B+s.

Finally, strict grade curves would turn classmates into opponents. There would be little incentive to join study groups or share notes if I knew that classmates are direct competitors for a scarce resource. For cultural comparisons, consider American law schools' internal competition.

Universal pass/fail grading is a bold proposition, and the concerns are obvious: it would demotivate students to learn, and it would fail to distinguish good from bad students. I have responses to both of them. To be effective, people would actually have to fail classes. Not often. Not every class. But universal norms of excellence could mean about 10 to 15 percent of all credit-hours attempted would result in a failing grade. Critically, this wouldn't mean a strict class-by-class curve; there is no reason to flunk three or four people per Directed Studies section.

Rather, hard norms of rigor — perhaps enforced through grade "audits" of departments reviewing each others' standards — would mean that failure wouldn't be uncommon. Critically, however, failure wouldn't be catastrophic. Students could retake the class for credit, although the original grade would still be recorded on the transcript, alongside the new grade. Moreover, the bar to failure could be rather high: perhaps anything below a B or B- on the current scale could count as a failure. Neglect of academic responsibilities would still carry costs. Importantly, too, students would still need to produce writing samples and letters of recommendation for future opportunities. They simply wouldn't be quantified.

Right now, colleges are stuck between competing obligations: education, that unsexy rationale for seminar classes; and differentiation and credentialing, that glamorous reason for finals season. And the latter kills the former. Not just because it takes vast amounts of time and attention. More importantly, it strips the soul out of learning. Knowledge must be commodified, measured and ranked. A seminar paper doesn't just get feedback; it gets feedback and an assessment of relative performance, with future opportunities tied to that assessment.

Pass/fail would shift the burden of evaluating students onto the institutions that actually hire or admit students after graduation. These institutions would have to determine some baseline metrics for admission that would reflect the actual responsibilities of the job: law schools would rely on the LSAT and writing samples. Finance firms would rely on modeling and technical interviews more heavily. Yale is one of the few institutions prestigious enough that switching to pass/fail grading might actually force a shift. Finance firms won't abandon Yale as recruiting territory if we no longer have traditional GPAs.

Universal pass/fail grading would essentially disaggregate the ranking and educational functions of colleges. I don't know if the solutions that institutions would choose instead of GPA would be more fair or less arbitrary. They might not be! They might rely more heavily on student club membership, which is its own can of worms. But the classroom itself, the core of the university, would be better insulated from the mechanisms of selection and discrimination. We Yalies have spent our lives trying to be selected. College shouldn't be subsumed to the next round of grade-based cuts in the selection process.

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