

OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST
TOM DAWBER

Restore summer funding for students who need it

Yale College’s decision to combine the International Study and Summer Experience Awards into a single one-time-only grant is deeply misguided and will harm the most vulnerable Yalies: those who receive financial aid.

For an institution that claims a commitment to equity, this policy change is incredibly inequitable. While the new policy will impact the more than 50 percent of Yale College students who receive financial aid, it will have a disproportionate effect on Yale’s poorest students.

I receive financial aid, but I’m not the student who will be hurt by this. I’ll still use my Summer Experience Grant to study abroad summer 2026. If I find an opportunity for which I would have used the SEA, I can find a way to make it work. I’m an Eli Whitney student, and I still work full-time. I have good credit, and I live in a two-income household. Without the SEA, I can fund an internship or another opportunity with a loan or by trimming the household budget somewhere. It won’t be easy, but it will be possible.

The same isn’t true for hundreds of other Yalies. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students from single-parent families, students who grew up in poverty — these students might not be able to find a way to “make it work.” There is no “trimming the household budget” in a household that’s already stretched to the breaking point. And expecting these students to take out student loans to fund professional development opportunities runs counter to Yale’s goal of graduating debt-free undergraduates.

When I arrived here, it quickly became clear that “Yale Summer” is very much a thing. Conversations at the end of spring semester are dominated by, “What are you doing this summer?” and the beginning of fall is filled with, “What did you do this summer?” The answers are as diverse as Yale’s student body. Yalies can earn language credit studying in Europe, or volunteer for nonprofits whose causes they’re passionate about. They can conduct field research in Bhutan or work in a congressman’s office. The ISA and SEA go a long way in providing equal opportunities to all Yale students, to ensure that not only students lucky enough to be born wealthy have access to these experiences.

The ISA and SEA serve two different purposes. Study abroad is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend weeks in an unfamiliar part of the world and grow as an individual. By contrast, the SEA gives students an opportunity for professional development, to

explore an internship that would otherwise be inaccessible due to financial constraints.

Asking Yale’s least-resourced students to choose only one of these opportunities is unfair. It will deepen the divide between the haves and the have-nots here. It slams the door in the faces of the very students who stand to benefit the most from both of these opportunities. Forcing 19- and 20-year-old students to choose between personal growth and professional development is cruel.

Had I attended Yale as a traditional undergraduate instead of in my 30s, married and with a career, I would have been one of Yale’s poorest students, too. I know how it feels to ask a single parent who is already doing the most they can to do a little bit more. I’ve had that conversation. I’ve been told, “No, I know it’s a great opportunity, but there’s just no way I can make it work.”

More Yale students and parents will have to have this painful conversation because of the new summer funding plan. I call on Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis to reconsider this shameful policy change. Students who are on full financial aid should still have access to funding for a second summer opportunity. Yale recognizes the financial constraints on these students’ families, even footing the costs for them to attend Bulldog Days. Where is that consideration in this decision?

Another option is to treat the new Summer Experience Grant as an account for each student who receives financial aid. Set it at \$18,540, a three-percent inflation increase of the 2025 maximum International Study Award, and allow students to use that money how they see fit. If a student chooses a summer abroad that uses their full allocation, that’s it. But if they opt for a less expensive summer abroad, allow them to use the remaining balance to fund a second summer opportunity.

I’m cognizant of the challenges facing Yale in today’s political climate. I know the endowment isn’t a piggy bank that can be broken open when funding sources disappear. Cuts need to be made and sacrifice is inevitable. But this cut demands a sacrifice only from Yale’s most vulnerable students. I reject the notion that there isn’t plenty of other fat to cut that would spread the hurt around a little more.

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GUEST COLUMNIST
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Jonathan Haidt hit one target, missed two

I was glad to be present in the packed space of Battell Chapel on Wednesday to hear renowned social psychologist and NYU professor Jonathan Haidt ’85 deliver the Presidential Lecture. Haidt made valuable points on the damaging effects of social media. He presented results of empirical studies showing real harm to young people’s mental health and educational performance over the past 15 years. Haidt also gave students strategies for maintaining well-being in this technologically saturated time: Get off your phones, read books, be intellectually curious and explore new subjects.

All to the good. Yet I felt the talk felt short in two significant ways.

First, it did not take history into account. His critique of the new media technologies seemed to assume that before Facebook, Twitter and TikTok, America had been a more-or-less harmonious, civil democratic polity. Of course, there were disagreements, but people of good will could debate without acrimony or censorship and ultimately reach consensus. Haidt’s scenario also assumed that all people were permitted to participate in the civil discourse, and none were excluded.

But this can’t possibly be true. Our history includes an actual civil war fought over the question of slavery. Nor did this conflict end with the Union’s victory. Breakdowns of respectful political discourse occurred during the Red Scares following the first World War and during the McCarthyism following the second. The divisions in the 1960s over civil rights and the Vietnam War were deep, bitter and lasting. One might argue our current social conflicts and the rise of Trumpism have their roots in the 1960s and, perhaps, even in post-Civil War Reconstruction. And all of that without social media!

We can speak of a broad New Deal consensus from the end of World War II lasting until the late 1960s, to which even Republican President

Dwight Eisenhower concurred. But in the context of what went before and what has come after, perhaps this time of consensus was an anomaly, not a norm. It is sad to think so, but there is a lot that is sad these days.

Likewise, attacks on universities and education in general have a long history. High schools in the early 20th century were criticized by business interests for being inefficient, concentrating too much on humanities at the expense of more practical vocational training. Similar attacks were lodged in the 1980s, and these attacks then combined with more ideological assaults on changing university curricula. There were “culture wars” and “canon wars” and attacks on so-called “tenured radicals” — another instance of renewed conflicts of the 1960s.

All this is context for considering Haidt’s criticisms of higher education today. He seemed most upset by the phenomenon of “wokeness” and particularly by attempts at censorship by the political Left. I share his feelings about shouting down speakers. Anyone invited to speak at a university should be allowed to speak. Those who disagree can then speak in response.

But Haidt said nothing about the widespread efforts to suppress accurate accounts of American history because they are not flattering enough to some people’s brittle and narrow ideas of patriotism. He said nothing about the banning of books. He did not share his views on whether the ethnic and gender studies programs now under such attack by conservatives possess the intellectual integrity that he rightly sees as essential to the university’s mission.

The university must pursue truth, he told us. Quite so. The pursuit of justice, however, he claimed is not within its purview. But the pursuit of truth is not antithetical to the pursuit

of justice. The bulk of the Western intellectual tradition does not regard it so. Truth and justice do not always fit easily — perhaps the controversies over “wokeness” demonstrate such friction; but, in the Humanities and even the social sciences, truth and justice cannot be separated without grave injury to both.

The second area where Haidt’s analysis of technology lacked dimension was the economics of the new technologies. The harmful effects on people’s psyches and on our social-political soul that Haidt effectively described do not have neutral, purely technical origins or goals. They are instruments of enormous wealth and the power that comes from that wealth.

It is not just technology that influences our minds. It is actual people: Musk, Zuckerberg, Thiel, Ellison, Bezos. If social media technologies have the effects and consequences that Haidt outlines — and I would have trouble arguing that they do not — these technol-oligarchs are the men who benefit in wealth and power. In this sense, Haidt is not an alarmist; if anything, he gravely underestimates the dangers of these technologies in how they concentrate information, money and power.

So, finally, I commend Jonathan Haidt for his research and for the good advice he imparted to the students. Get off your devices; read books; write meaningful prose — without artificial intelligence! But, still, to paraphrase Horatio’s comment to Hamlet, “There needs no social psychologist, my lord, come from NYU to tell us this.” What we need is less ultimately evasive “techno-determinism” and more clear historical and economic understanding of our current political, educational and technological crises.

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GUEST COLUMNIST
JACOB HARMS

We’re not wasting enough classtime

I recently transferred to Yale from a two-year college in California called Deep Springs. The college is designed to entrust its students with, in the founder’s own words, “grave responsibilities” and the “broad discretionary powers” to fulfill them. As one of these powers, students determine the course of seminars. No one raises their hands and professors speak minimally. The class is led by its attendees.

The result is a lot of wasted time. Students waffle and flounder and frustrate each other and themselves. I think seminar classes at Yale would do well to waste more time in this way. They should let students talk each other in more circles and mislead each other at a greater frequency, under the guidance of a professor who bails them out less often.

Why, after all, should colleges teach seminars in the first place? A story from my first year at Deep Springs helped me answer this question for myself.

In a Friday morning literature class just over halfway through the term, the conversation slowed, paused, then came to a halt. It was normal in this class to let a silence fester. On this particular day, though, breaks had been frequent. We struggled to find a uniform point to interrogate and failed to speak collaboratively with each other. Around an hour into the 90 minute session, with just 30 minutes left in what was most students’ last academic commitment of the week, the professor excused himself and left. He said something I don’t quite remember — but to the effect of “well, if that’s all...” — and slung his bag over his shoulder to go.

I don’t think this story is a good general model for classroom

leadership. I do think it reminds us what seminars are supposed to do.

The idea is not that seminars are more efficient than lectures. Nobody would claim that students can teach each other the material better than professors can. My professor left to remind us that our college education isn’t about him.

Colleges should teach seminars because at their best, they force students to situate their devotion to the material in the context of their devotion to each other. In a seminar you should learn about a subject — Shakespeare or fossil fuels or demand elasticity — and you should simultaneously learn how to properly attend to this subject in a room full of people who are also eager to.

The goal, after all, is not merely to know a great deal about Shakespeare or fossil fuels or demand elasticity. The goal is to know about a subject, and moreover know how to best contribute to discourses which pertain to that subject. People who are only knowledgeable don’t do great things. Those who do great things are knowledgeable, but also have a sense of how their knowledge figures into the world around them.

A good seminar simulates this project. Students have to decide, in a moment when their peers also want to contribute, whether or not their own thought is the most timely one. They may have to temporarily take up an idea that, in their eyes, departs from the text, because the integrity of the text is not the only thing they’re beholden to in the seminar room. In a healthy seminar, they are just as beholden to the peer that made the point.

I think that raising hands in seminars — a standard practice at Yale — prevents students from

gleaning what they ought to from their class time. In a moderated seminar space, the likelihood of a comment being taken up is no longer a function of its quality, or even of the rapport its speaker has with the room. Its contents are only important as a measure for how long everyone else will have to wait.

At the end of the day, the worst experience one might have in a moderated space is a boring one. The floor for the conversation is still tenably high.

In an open conversation, the class can be properly wasted. Interruptions, tangents, hurt feelings and antagonisms can fester and students can leave and go to sleep frustrated. But it is no longer possible for students to disentangle themselves from their dissatisfactions with a class. Each critique levied against a seminar is in a part a self-critique. This kind of involvement encourages a stewardship of the classroom that is presently not asked of students.

One more story from Deep Springs comes to mind: One morning during my second year, a professor sent a last-minute email to cancel class due to an emergency. Four students missed the email, showed up and talked about the book for an hour and a half.

By most metrics, Deep Springs’ classes are less efficient than Yale’s. They teach fewer things in more time. Yet Deep Springs students would not measure their education by the amount they have learned. They’d measure it instead by how well it figures into the conversations unfolding around them.

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