OPINION

Abandon institutional voice



GEORGE BEEVERS
Staff columnist

Universities are meant to be sanctuaries for discovery — spaces where curiosity, research and open dialogue shape our understanding of the world. Trust in that mission is fundamental. Without it, the integrity of higher education crumbles and universities risk losing their role as credible arbiters of knowledge. Today, this trust is becoming increasingly fragile, strained by political polarization and the sense that universities have become ideological actors rather than impartial centres of learning.

As a British student, I'm constantly being asked about our campus political climate by people back home. American universities have faced mounting criticism — particularly from political and media figures — who frame them as bastions of "wokeness" and ideological indoctrination. This narrative portrays universities as out of touch with ordinary Americans, more invested in moral posturing than in rigorous scholarship. It's damaging and unhelpful for society and for the universities themselves. When trust in a university erodes, its graduates carry the burden of stereotypes and its research risks being dismissed — not for its quality, but for its perceived bias.

If this isn't the case elsewhere, why is it an issue here? The answer is a difference in culture: universities as institutions in America act as persons in their expression of ideas and controversy.

But no university can truly speak for all of its stakeholders. Yale, like any university campus, holds thousands of different minds and perspectives. Expecting a single institution to represent all of them is impossible. When universities attempt to adopt political stances on behalf of their communities, they alienate some and embolden others, contributing to the polarization already fracturing public discourse. Trust cannot thrive in such an environment — it demands humility from institutions and space for disagreement amongst individuals.

Instead, we should anchor trust where it has always belonged: in the quality of education, research and intellectual output. These are the functions that make a university valuable — not its alignment with fickle, shifting public opinion. A trusted university is one that upholds standards, safeguards fairness and creates environments where inquiry instead of ideology define it.

In the market for universities, schools like Yale trade much less on distinct academic content than on reputation — the same Intro to Microeconomics course with nearly identical material exists at countless other institutions. What makes a university unique is not its syllabus but the prestige attached to it: the belief that they signify rigor, fairness and intellectual excellence. That reputation becomes a kind of social currency. When trust in that reputation falters, the actual educational product loses much of its perceived value, no matter how strong the teaching or research remains. Trust, then, is not just moral or abstract — it is the foundation of an institution's practical influence.

The stakes are much higher than simple pride or prestige. For students, trust in their university translates into real-world opportunity. Rightly or wrongly, employers, research partners and the public all draw signals from reputation. When universities seem politically charged, those signals blur. The "Yale" name should reflect scholarly excellence, integrity and fairness — not assumptions about one's personal politics or beliefs. Where you study should inform others about your skills and intellectual standards, not your ideological stance.

Having been through the UK's educational system, I find this to be an especially striking contrast. In the UK, universities tend to maintain a much clearer distinction between institutional purpose and political identity. British universities, with very few exceptions, refrain from speaking on behalf of their communities on social or political matters. This doesn't mean that they're indifferent to injustice or criticism. It means their role is to foster informed debate, not to pre-determine its outcome. When the Oxford Union hosts political debates, it does so as a platform for diverse perspectives, but doesn't implicate Oxford University as a partisan actor. As a result, UK universities cultivate trust through consistency and academic excellence rather than ideological signalling.

If American universities value trust, they might learn from this model. This doesn't necessitate silence or complicity: universities should address political and social questions through research, dialogue and education — the tools of their trade — not through institutional endorsements that collapse complex debates and perspectives into soundbites. Although Yale's institutional voice guidance somewhat serves this purpose, we ought to focus less on regulating our "voice," and more on being an institution. When universities are seen as fair and rigorous, their contributions carry more weight in public life: policymakers listen more closely, graduates aren't burdened with unhelpful stereotypes and students feel freer to express uncertainty or dissent without fear of professional backlash. In short, people become more comfortable speaking when the institution speaks less.

Maintaining institutional trust is not about protecting elite privilege. It is about ensuring universities remain credible, accessible and useful to the societies that support them. At Yale and elsewhere, we should care deeply about trust in higher education because it underwrites everything that universities do. In a time when labels and polarization already define much of American identity, universities should offer an alternative model: one where truth, not tribe, binds people together.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

BRIAN MOORE

Why you should walk to New York

Last Sunday, I was shuttling around the basement of Trinity on the Green, handing out information about warming centers to homeless parishioners. During one stop, I introduced myself to a middle-aged woman named Julia. After helping clarify the opening time and location of a particular shelter, I moved onto the next client.

Five minutes later, while in the midst of another conversation, I heard Julia's familiar voice piping up behind me:

"Wait — are you the Brian from the walk to New York?"

I stopped in my tracks, at a momentary loss for words.

"Uhh, yes?" I stammered. "How did you know it was me?"

She explained to me that a couple months ago she had picked up a copy of the Yale Daily News on York Street. She had been captivated by the article about our trek to New York, my name still cinched into her mind. What followed was the story of an equally foolhardy adventure from her youth — an ill-fated attempt to bicycle from central Florida to Connecticut along the interstate.

As I find my footing in my final semester at Yale, our once-legendary walk to New York had faded into a misty recollection, little more than an overwrought talking point. Yet it is because of moments like these that I chose to walk to New York — and why you should too.

The most common question I received, both during and in anticipation of the walk, was "Why?" Why subject yourself to eighty miles of bone-wearying, leg-depleting, arch-crushing torture? You know there's a train. Surely there must be some sort of grand cause.

Well, folks, the cause was unimpressively simple: just because. It was neither practical, nor logical, nor sane. And yet, it spoke to something deeply human. It was the same impulse that summoned the aging nobleman Alonso Quijano after waking up one morning to become the gallivanting knight Don Quixote, or that drove the idle, restless Ishmael out to the boundless expanse of the sea. It is something you discover along the way, if you ever do at all.

This call to adventure now increasingly falls on deaf ears. All of us, in one way or another, answered this call by attending Yale, whether from down the road or halfway across the world. Yet the same risk-taking that brought us here is now dismissed as juvenile whimsy. Once we settle into routine and career, adventure — because it refuses to be rationalized — becomes a distraction. In short, we grow boring and stale, suffering a kind of premature death.

In "To the Lighthouse," Virginia Woolf locates life's meaning not in grandiose philosophical abstractions but in "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark." It is precisely when we stop calculating, stop weighing cost against utility, that meaning quietly slips in.

It is that same illumination, I imagine, that lit up Julia's face when she cracked open the News to spot our ragtag group assembled before the Grand Central Concourse. The same flicker that moved a Hong Kong university student to send a heartfelt message of support. That inspired one walker to publish a vivid, weaved-together narrative of her experience. That drew zestful third-graders spilling out of school to join us for a mile. That led one hiker — limping, battered, lagging but not defeated — to proclaim, "This is the best thing I have ever done."

When planning the walk to New York, I faced a decisive inflection point. Originally, the trip was meant to be just me and a couple of close friends. One of them warned that inviting the wider campus would be opening Pandora's box. Open Pandora's box I did, and it stands as one of the best decisions I have made at Yale.

As my time here draws to a close, it is beginning to dawn on me that the walk is no longer mine, nor that of my co-organizers. In truth, it may have never belonged to us at all. It belongs to you. Whether it remains a flash in the pan or grows into a storied Yale tradition is in your hands.

Your call to adventure might not be walking to New York — but it might just be. And if it is, what do you have to lose?

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LETTER **2.17.2026**

Fight numbness with action

We are all Yalies. We are students. We are alumni. We are parents of current Yale undergraduates. We are Yale faculty.

We write in response to a report in the Yale Daily News that students have felt numbed from the barrage of bad news coming out of Washington, D.C., from Minneapolis, from around the country. That numbness is not an accident, it's the point.

The events of this year are not random shocks or disconnected headlines. They are cumulative and deliberate. Authoritarian politics has always relied on exhaustion, confusion and isolation of ordinary people trying to pay attention. If we feel overwhelmed, we stop acting. If we feel alone, we stop believing that our actions matter.

What makes our moment different than any in history is how easily we are separated from one another. The same technologies and platforms that promised connection now leave us scrolling alone through crises on our phones, emergencies that feel either distant or unstoppable. Yet neither is true. At this moment we must remember that we are not isolated spectators. If social media and our devices don't connect us, we are linked together in more fundamental ways: We are roommates, suitemates, families, friends and neighbors.

Each of us chose Yale. That makes New Haven our neighborhood, our community right now. In a few months, members of the senior class will choose new cities, schools, workplaces and communities across the country to live in. Those places will be theirs to belong to soon enough. And even as adults we retain connections to where we were born and grew up, even if just in memory for some of us. And all these places are under threat now.

Archimedes said that with a place to stand, he could move the world. Yale is a place to stand, to make a stand. So are our colleges and classrooms, labs and libraries, dining halls and dorm rooms, as well as your hometowns and New Haven. Where we are now, our communities and our neighborhoods are the places where if we stand together, we can create leverage, move things and change the world.

We are not powerless.

While you may not notice it, there are many people on campus working to stem the attacks on higher education, on research, on the rights of immigrants and others who have been under siege by this White House.

One thing is clear to us: The antidote to numbness is action. Each of us have joined organizations working to make things right, and if nothing else, have found a sense of purpose, as we struggle for a better future.

Emily and Michael, seniors in Yale College, believe that a key solution to the seemingly overwhelming attacks on democracy is creating a clear, forward-looking vision to organize behind. In the last year, both have been increasingly disillusioned by the ways in which Yale has undermined trust in higher education and chosen silence amid a myriad of injustices. So, they've gotten involved with Class Action, a non-profit organization that works to make elite higher education more accountable to the public good. They've connected with organizers across the nation putting in hard work and seeing real results — catalyzing the end of legacy admissions in California and expanding a national conversation about the harms of corporate career funneling. Organizing spaces gives them energy, clarity and hope. And as more people get involved, their voices cannot be ignored.

Katherine and Jess, together with fellow Yale College alums Susan Choi and Erica Newland, founded the alumni organization Stand Up for Yale last spring. Within a few weeks, they had gathered over 7,000 signatures to two open letters to Yale's leadership, telling Yale's president and trustees that alumni are hungry for bold action to protect academic freedoms, both at Yale and country-wide, and will support their alma mater in taking such actions. After a jointly sponsored tailgate with Harvard's Crimson Courage at The Game this past fall, the group is gearing up for new actions at this spring's reunions. If you are an alum, or soon to be one, please join them!

Gregg and Katherine along with other faculty members at Yale are part of a newly reinvigorated chapter of the American Association of University Professors, which has been organizing teach-ins on campus, advocacy with our administration and joint actions with faculty at other institutions. Gregg has also started a coalition called Defend Public Health, which has 8000 plus members around the country including Yale faculty, staff and students defending biomedical research at the National Institutes of Health, public health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, LGBTQ members of our community, immigrants and other marginalized populations whom we serve as leaders in health.

We've listed these organizations and activities just to let you know there are places to plug in, ways to make a difference. There are many other places to get involved. These are just a few. Former Yale professor Timothy Snyder, in his book "On Tyranny," urged us all in 2017 to practice corporeal politics: "Power wants your body softening in your chair and your emotions dissipating on the screen. Get outside. Put your body in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. Make new friends and march with them."

We are now indeed new friends and we are marching together. Emily, Michael, Jess and Gregg met just a few weeks ago at a College Organizing Convening in Orlando, Florida, sponsored by the Emergency Campaign to Support Higher Education, which brought over 300 students and some alumni from colleges around the country together to train and strategize. Katherine and Gregg and other Yale alums met each other last year while organizing rallies on campus during reunion season in May.

There is safety in numbers. There are more good people in this world than bad. We have to find each other, stick together and get to work. Whether you do it on campus or elsewhere, you can shape history even in these terrible times. It bears repeating: the antidote to numbness is action. So together, from Yale to wherever we call home next, let's make a commitment among us, to make a difference by getting up, out from behind our desks, into a world of hope.

Emily Hettinger, Michael Ndubisi, Katherine Profeta, Jess Marsden and Gregg Gonsalves