OPINION

STAFF COLUMNIST

WILLIAM BARBEE

The tyranny of the teaching fellow

As the battle for trust in higher education continues to capture public attention, Yale has taken yet another step to preserve its institutional reputation. The recently-announced Committee on the Principles of Academic Freedom will examine the "historical, legal, and ethical foundations of academic freedom," ultimately producing a report designed to build upon Yale's existing policies regarding this "sacred principle." Akin to a modern, albeit less groundbreaking, Woodward Report, the output of this committee will likely contribute some meaningful defense of free expression. Without ruffling too many feathers, it will keep in line with the precedents set by President Maurie McInnis' other established committees.

Still, this latest iteration in Yale's series of attempts to reassert its standing as a leading academic institution has the potential to make meaningful headway in the fight for intellectual diversity on campus. As they conduct their research, those on the committee must not be afraid to recognize that promoting academic freedom may, in some cases, necessitate restricting it. Nowhere can this principle be better applied than in those small, cloistered classrooms in which one entity — the teaching fellow — rules supreme.

Nearly every undergraduate at Yale will at one point take a class that requires section attendance with a teaching fellow, or TF. They are as much a part of the classroom experience as tenured professors, with students exposed to them for at least a third of in-person time for many lecture courses. For such an integral component of student life, one would imagine the administration has developed detailed policies to ensure uniform standards for TFs across departments. Unfortunately, such standards have proven inadequate in preventing curricular hijacking by ideological graduate students.

The horror stories are too abundant to count. From my own experience, derived chiefly from courses in American history, I have had TFs trade handouts on Alexander Hamilton for those on Jacques Derrida, spending 30 minutes on deconstructionist state theory in a section meant to provide understanding of the federal bank. I have had TFs abandon any effort to teach material on the Civil War, exchanging discussion of the readings for a round of online quizzes on American pop culture. I have had TFs ask directly why I continue to try in class when post-graduate life, and even the university itself, is nothing but a rat race.

The lack of viewpoint diversity within sections often makes these issues one-sided. Most TFs stifle attempts to disagree with their left-leaning ideological framing of certain political, historical or moral questions, giving such opinions little time or seriousness. The trope of doctrinaire academics teaching "what to think" instead of "how to think" is closer to home than we are led to believe — nowhere more so than in TF-led sections.

To label such encounters as dispiriting would be an understatement. At best, they make for an underwhelming class experience that forces one to reconsider one's enrollment at a university of such renown as Yale. At worst, they represent the fundamental fear held by millions across the country: that the modern university has become a mere front for indoctrination.

I do not mean to deliver superfluous complaints, nor do I wish to paint the entire community of teaching fellows with a singular brush. I have enjoyed the sections of several TFs and even had the pleasure of getting to know some personally outside of class. But the fact that selecting a section at Yale is akin to playing a game of Russian roulette poses a serious problem to students who expect to receive a quality education at Yale.

The process of rectifying this situation begins where all university processes begin: administrative policy. The current, publicly-available guidelines for faculty and teaching fellows offer no rules for how TFs ought to conduct themselves in section, and they certainly offer no means by which undergraduates might communicate lackluster performances outside of the mandatory end-of-semester class surveys.

If Yale's Committee on Academic Freedom can achieve anything, it is the tightening of expectations for TFs in classroom settings. Such guidelines should state clearly that there ought to be no unusual deviations from course syllabi, no divergence from course material without express professorial approval, and no dismissal of undergraduates on the basis of political opinion. In positive terms, there ought to be free and open discussion in all sections, with undergraduates who perceive that a violation of said rules has taken place being able to report such matters to the course professor or university.

These proposals do not serve to create a safe space for undergraduates who cannot stand a liberal professor — they seek to remove one for TFs who cannot stand a conservative student. If the guidelines remain as vague as they are now, I fear there will be no other way for us to overthrow the tyranny of the teaching fellow.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

SOFIA HEREDIA

Value intellect, not high grades

In the past decades, numerous committees from Ivy League universities have attempted to pass policies rectifying grade inflation. Few have gone anywhere. A Dartmouth committee's policy proposals in 2015 were never implemented by the university. At Yale, 2014 committee recommendations were left to instructors to implement, resulting in little to no change.

Attempts at mitigating grade inflation have failed because they have been too extreme, and because faculty have faced backlash from students when attempting to grade more harshly. Yet actually solving grade inflation may require the harsh action that universities have been attempting. It will be on students and faculty to adjust over time.

Recently, Harvard began discussions on a proposal to cap the amount of A grades given in a course. Yale's Dean Pericles Lewis said recently that Yale will be looking closely at how things progress at Harvard. A grade cap may be in our future.

If all goes well, students and faculty will adjust to fewer As after a couple years of discomfort. Achieving the A will be a cause for celebration rather than an expectation and source of relief. Students will feel less pressure to take "guts", or easy classes, instead opting for courses that genuinely interest them.

Drawbacks of a grade cap policy include students feeling threatened by a lower GPA, which would make them less competitive in the job and graduate school market, and professors' preoccupation with whether they've assigned an appropriate percentage of As and Bs, with perhaps less concern about providing helpful feedback to students.

There is a way to combat these hurdles at Yale. Yale needs to rearticulate its institutional values in a way that is public and clearly understandable. Currently, Yale's grading information websites are practical and informational for students seeking guidance on administrative matters. They lack, however, a clear narrative behind the University's grading system and are textually dense. A grading website page should explain how Yale's grading policy is coupled with a pedagogical philosophy, one that furthers values like growth and learning. Brown, for example, references its Open Curriculum as a pedagogical reason for their grading system.

The Yale College mission statement explains that Yale's liberal education seeks to develop students' "intellectual, moral, civic, and creative capacities to the fullest" in order for them to become "curious, engaged citizens." Yale also seeks to help students "develop as active learners who thrive in complex environments." Traits like creativity, active learning and curiosity can best be fostered through academic exploration and growth. If students and faculty can adhere to this spirit inside and outside of the classroom, then we can achieve a positive academic culture that is compatible with grade caps.

Ultimately, the A should retain the value of excellence, but Yale should assume responsibility for making sure A-receiving students are producing truly excellent work. As a result, the standard of the A should increase as students improve throughout the year. Striving for student growth looks like ample written feedback from professors on assignments, classroom discussions that encourage disagreement and opportunities for students to collaborate.

A grading statement that takes inspiration from the college's mission statement will be instrumental to maintaining a spirit of curiosity and growth through academic discourse. Professors will be encouraged to uphold the pedagogical values a Yale education strives for, reducing the risk of numerically driven grading that lacks feedback for students.

By making this grading statement accessible for employers and graduate schools, students wouldn't have to worry about being punished by admissions officers for lower GPAs. Respect and understanding will be built for how Yale grades its students.

Despite student worry, attacking grade inflation with grade caps may be the catalyst for cultural change we need on campus. Yale students wouldn't be fearful of exploring challenging courses, and classrooms would be imbued with a spirit of curiosity and intellectual rigor. And isn't the ultimate mission of Yale to foster emboldened intellectual pursuit?

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GUEST COLUMNIST

NATE STEIN

On grace and curiosity

Picture the perfect liberal arts institution. What I envision is a collegiate gothic campus, an intellectual haven where students engage in lively debate, wrestle with crazy ideas and seek out the passionate tension of disagreement.

I'd say that most students here would agree that Yale does its best to get as close to this vision as possible, but there are a number of practical considerations that complicate the institution's reach for perfection. And I, for whatever reason, have spent the last few months fixated on just one: intellectual isolation.

As coddled as we admittedly are, everyone on the spectrum of liberal to conservative is charged with some burden. To the slim conservative minority — let's be generous and call them the 5 percent — goes the burden of grace: to listen respectfully, to be challenged constantly and to argue clearly. To the vast liberal majority — the remaining 95 percent — goes the burden of curiosity: to seek out disagreement and to value difference of opinion.

It's no secret that liberal viewpoints are the prevailing ones on campus, but I honestly don't buy many arguments about how differences in politics lead to social isolation — maybe in extreme cases, which are rare. Intellectual isolation, on the other hand, is pervasive and problematic.

Simply put, a conservative student at Yale cannot avoid opinions with which he disagrees. This applies in a formal classroom setting as much as it does during a casual dining hall meal. He routinely stares down the possibility of being written off or explicitly ridiculed, and to nix that underlying stress, he must cultivate a unique kind of grace: the ability to engage thoughtfully without growing defensive, combative, flustered or disillusioned.

To extend this grace is not a choice. If he wants to participate in Yale's intellectual community at all, it is essential. He is forced to listen more carefully, question his assumptions more often and articulate his points more clearly. He must constantly and tactfully navigate his identity and his beliefs, all the while resisting the relief that his own echo chamber, no matter how small, is always poised to provide.

A liberal student at Yale leads an entirely different life. He faces the opposite problem: sometimes he cannot even find opinions with which he disagrees. Many students enter Yale with their ideological views solidified, but given the prevailing culture on campus, liberal students in particular have no incentive to step outside their comfort zones and engage with conservative or right-leaning ideas. The liberal student should be pushed to question his beliefs and actively seek out ideas that challenge his assumptions — in fact, he should want to do just that.

But as I — and I'm sure many others on campus — have seen, this is not the world we live in. Yale is not the perfect liberal arts institution — far from it. It's too easy for a liberal student here to remain inside his ideological bubble, stunting the necessary intellectual growth that comes from exposure to diverse perspectives.

The problem becomes clear. The 5 percent must practice grace, but the 95 percent, by virtue of their majority status, are not held to the same standard for curiosity. Conservatives are expected — I won't quite say "forced," but it's not far off — to engage with ideas they find disagreeable or offensive, while liberals are rarely expected to do the same and definitely never forced. The conservative experience at Yale is one of constant engagement with difference and dissonance, an opportunity for growth that the majority so often denies itself.

I do not advocate for arbitrarily more conservative representation on my campus. That would only attempt to address the symptoms of a much deeper cultural disease — I write "attempt" because I don't believe it would even do much at all.

Instead, a cultural reckoning has to happen, one that encourages everyone, regardless of political affiliation, to seek out diverse perspectives. One that holds both the 5 percent and the 95 percent to equally high standards. One that coddles none of us. One that stems from good faith.

A Yale education is not just about mastering academic knowledge. It's about acquiring the intellectual flexibility to engage with a wide array of ideas and people. In a polarized world like ours, that flexibility is more important than it ever has been, and the University does us no service by neglecting to hold that in mind and act accordingly.

If we are ever to seriously bring Yale closer to that perfect institution — where ideas of all kinds are listened to, challenged and refined — we must seriously consider the imbalance between those of us burdened with grace and with curiosity, and we must all commit to listening more intently, challenging more respectfully and refining more carefully. Our institution's intellectual health depends on it.

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