

OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST
HANNAH OWENS PIERRE

Yale needs more conservatives

I came to Yale expecting to be surrounded by classmates and professors “who hold a diverse range of perspectives and beliefs,” as Yale’s former initiative on diversity, equity and inclusion promised. Instead, I found something different: despite its appeals to openness, political viewpoints on campus often cluster within a fairly narrow spectrum.

Throughout my time at Yale, I have been disappointed by the institution’s partisanship. Yale offers explicitly progressive courses; one class, “No Time for Tears: Friendships between Black Women and White Women,” asks, “Are these relationships even possible?” Entire departments, such as Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies, are rooted in progressivism. I haven’t seen a class rooted in conservative political thought.

This imbalance shapes the tone of conversation. In a political philosophy class discussion on immigration, my peers affirmed one another’s radical stances — including support for open borders and abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement — while appearing careful not to step out of the party line. Signaling conservatism, even for the sake of debate, seems to risk public backlash — it’s no wonder that a report by the Buckley Institute found that 60 percent of students say they often feel intimidated about sharing beliefs that differ from those of their classmates.

Another report by Buckley found that there are no Republican faculty members across 27 Yale departments. Similarly, the Yale Daily News reported that 0 percent of Yale professors’ political donations went to Republicans. Among students, the overwhelming majority identify as liberal, likely because, as another Buckley report found, among 26 employees involved in undergraduate admissions, none are registered Republicans. Conservative groups exist at Yale, but they are small compared to their liberal counterparts and unrepresentative of the overall student body. The Yale College Republicans, for instance, were only revived last year after a nearly ten-year hiatus.

These trends are troubling. Yale prides itself on being an institution of learning, yet it shuts off opportunities for intellectual growth by keeping students in an ideological bubble. This environment robs them of the most valuable opportunity a university ought to offer: the ability to discover the truth.

Pursuit of truth demands intellectual humility. No political party is correct on every issue, and intelligent people exist across the political spectrum. Ideas are sharpened when they are challenged. Absent disagreement, students embrace extremism, according to a study by political scientist Sarah Hobolt and colleagues, and lose the critical thinking skills that higher education is designed to foster.

They resist engaging the other side, instead generalizing their opponents as fascists or bigots.

In addition to stunting students’ growth, the lack of many conservative thinkers at Yale is a symptom of a much larger issue: a culture of exclusion against conservatism by elite institutions. It is not by accident that Yale wound up having almost no Republican faculty members.

According to a Pew survey, 46 percent of Americans identify as or lean Republican — slightly more than those who lean Democrat. While the percentage among university professors is lower, one must ask why. Is there some innate difference between Democrats and Republicans that makes the latter vastly less likely to pursue academia? Or is it instead the fact that those hiring professors are almost exclusively Democrats themselves?

Many liberals argue that these trends, rather than reflecting bad practices on behalf of Yale, have to do with the Republican Party attacking academia. But this explanation collapses under scrutiny. It requires the belief that Yale’s faculty transformed into a near-unanimous Democratic bloc only in response to Trump-era rhetoric. A more plausible explanation is that ideological homogeneity has long existed and is now being justified rather than examined.

Do conservatives hate higher education, or is it rather that they reject ideological favoritism? It would be strange to celebrate overturning affirmative action, or create organizations like Charlie Kirk’s Turning Point USA to promote conservative thought in universities, if the goal were to see such institutions perish.

The response of my peers to Yale’s lack of political diversity exhibits the exact problems of ideological insularity that the Buckley report condemns. They stereotype the Republican party as opposed to the values of “truth and the academic community,” as one opinion piece in the News put it, suggesting that these are only found among Democrats. This generalization suggests that Yale students lack an accurate understanding of the modern conservative.

Though Yale is largely an ideological bubble, the rest of the world is not. When they graduate, students will encounter people from across the political spectrum. If Yale is serious about preparing students for that reality, it must do better. A university committed to truth should welcome intellectual challenge — not avoid it. Yale must amend its hiring and admissions practices and welcome more conservatives among its staff and student body.

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The death of the Yale gentleman

I only know one Yale student who dresses in the eponymous Ivy fashion: tennis sweaters over Oxford shirts and penny loafers to complete his appearance. In the near past, this young man’s attire would have been commonplace on Yale’s campus. Yale has undergone a transformation wherein the figure of the Yale gentleman — the Nick Carraway type who was once a symbol of cultivated restraint and moral seriousness — has all but vanished.

In his place stands a fragmented successor: the anxious technocrat, the disillusioned ideologue or the ironic cosmopolitan. This transformation reflects not merely a shift in aesthetic, but a deeper unraveling of the moral and educational ideals that once gave elite formation its purpose. Where did the Yale gentleman go, and more than that, should we mourn him?

Yale once understood itself as a moral and civic formation, not merely a credentialing apparatus. It produced men steeped in the great books tradition — formed by Plato and Augustine as much as by mathematics or law — who were trained to deliberate about the ends of life before mastering its means. Education aimed at judgment, character and statesmanship.

Today, that formation has largely given way to technocracy: the production of highly skilled managers fluent in process, metrics and policy abstraction but increasingly estranged from substantive moral reasoning. What has been lost is not only a costume or an etiquette—the Yale gentleman as an aesthetic — but

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an ideal of education ordered toward wisdom rather than optimization. The question, then, is not whether we should nostalgically revive him, but whether a university that no longer forms persons capable of asking first-order questions about the good can still claim to educate at all.

Philosophically, this transformation reflects what Alasdair MacIntyre famously diagnosed as the loss of a shared moral tradition. In his book “After Virtue,” MacIntyre described how modern elites cease to be bearers of coherent ethical inheritance and become instead managers or emotivists — figures adept at technique or expression but untethered from substantive accounts of the good. The Yale gentleman, once a synthesis of classical virtue, Protestant moral seriousness and civic responsibility, becomes unintelligible under these conditions.

Indeed, the disappearance of the gentlemanly ideal opened the gates to many who had been excluded from this closed circle. The old ideal, for all its polish and cultivated restraint, was fundamentally exclusive. It drew its strength from a narrow, homogenous circle — one that systematically excluded women, racial minorities, religious outsiders and those without the cultural capital to perform its codes. I, for one, as a woman, can now attend Yale and participate fully in its intellectual life — an opportunity that would have been impossible had the university clung to its aristocratic past.

Yet even as we acknowledge these gains, we must ask what has been lost when formation is abandoned in favor of either pure self-expression or instrumental careerism. If the gentleman’s demise was a necessary clearing of the old order, what new forms of character and civic responsibility might we cultivate in its wake?

Perhaps it is time, then, not simply to mourn the Yale gentleman, but to ask what new kind of human being our universities should form in his absence. The old figure — dignified, restrained and morally serious — represented both an ideal and an exclusion. In dismantling the gates that kept many out, we have gained greater justice and diversity of voice. Yet in the rush to democratize, we risk losing the very notion that an elite

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should be more than merely a credentialed class — that it should be a moral and civic vanguard, trained not only for power but for sacrifice and stewardship.

The challenge before us is not to resurrect the gentleman wholesale, but to recover the animating conviction that education is soulcraft: that it is meant to shape human beings who can hold authority lightly, wield it wisely and embody a sense of responsibility beyond the self. The lone student in a tennis sweater and loafers, wandering among his ironic or restless peers, becomes a living emblem of this tension — a ghost of an older aspiration and a question posed to the present.

In the end, the death of the Yale gentleman compels us to ask not simply what we have left behind, but what we are willing to build in its place. What virtues do we want our future leaders to cultivate? What models of greatness should animate the next generation? And most importantly, what kind of soul should a true education dare to shape?

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