

OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST
ZACHARY CLIFTON

The Ivy League is still a public good

Donald Trump has made clear what he thinks about elite universities. In 2024, during his campaign for president, Trump said that schools like MIT, Columbia, Stanford and Penn “will pay us billions for the terror they have unleashed into our once-great country.” Now, with the new endowment tax increase taking effect this year, President Trump is making good on his threat. His attacks against elite universities, particularly the Ivy League, are punitive. But they’re also politically astute: Only 15 percent of Americans say they have a great deal of trust in the Ivy League, according to a Manhattan Institute survey from last summer.

But that statistic, and the distrust that it shows, is misplaced. I’d like to think that if more Americans better understood these institutions, the public’s trust in them would look very different.

In 2023, I was a high school student at a small public school in a rural town in Kentucky. My hometown doesn’t look like an Ivy League campus. There is little racial diversity, and only 20.9 percent of people living there have a bachelor’s degree or higher, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Where I’m from in Kentucky is one of the poorest places in the United States. In fact, the cost of a semester at Yale exceeds the median household income in my hometown, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

You can imagine my surprise, then, when Michael Rebell and Michael Gregory, legal scholars from Harvard Law School and Columbia University’s Teachers College, reached out to the Kentucky Student Voice Team, or KSVT, where I was organizing and where I still lead as a senior advisor. The professors wanted to come to my town to develop a partnership with us, researching Kentucky’s public schools. I needed to show them around and scramble some students and teachers at my high school to speak with them.

Over two years, the professors visited my town and a dozen other towns around a state that could be called antidotal to common stereotypes about the Ivy League as a respite for liberal coastal elites.

The professors were curious about Kentucky, specifically Rose v. Council for Better Education, a Kentucky State Supreme Court case decided in 1989. In that decision, the state’s entire public school system was ruled unconstitutional for failing to provide an efficient and adequate education, prompting lawmakers to overhaul and rebuild it from the ground up. Rebell and Gregory, whom us students affectionately call “the Mikes,” are providing legal representation for KSVT in their capacities as professors at

Harvard Law School. Rebell left Columbia for Harvard in the time since I graduated high school. If their suit against Kentucky succeeds, it could force the state legislature to change Kentucky’s public schools, where nearly 700,000 students are enrolled.

Kentucky, to many, might seem like the last place Harvard and Columbia scholars would come looking. But it wasn’t. And they’re not the only Ivy League universities looking outside their campuses’ wrought iron gates.

Last summer, I found a job listing for an office assistant at Yale Law School’s Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law. Working there showed me how Ivy League law schools invest in the public good. My boss, Katherine Braner LAW ’93, teaches students at Yale Law School about solitary confinement and travels to correctional facilities in Connecticut to teach incarcerated people about their rights. And that’s only about a fifth of the work she does at the Liman Center.

There are real reasons for Americans to be skeptical about the Ivy League. In 2025, more than one-third of students who graduated from Yale were hired by finance, tech and consulting firms, such as McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, Meta and JP Morgan. Those companies have not always given Americans good reasons to trust them. Meta has mishandled data and undermined elections. Goldman Sachs sold high-risk mortgages, leading to the 2008 financial crisis.

Even still, those graduates aren’t the only ones that Yale has set into American society. Yale produced the first medical X-ray images, introduced penicillin and chemotherapy to the United States, developed the first artificial heart pump, discovered melatonin, identified Lyme disease, built the first insulin pump — the list goes on, and these are only medical contributions.

Yale is not perfect. Other universities aren’t either. But Trump, for his part, is simply a populist who understands that attacking the Ivy League bodes well with his base. He’s counting on most Americans not looking closely enough to complicate their feelings about institutions whose legacies are complicated. But the Mikes, who visit Kentucky to fight for better public schools, and Kate Braner, who teaches incarcerated people about their rights, are hallmarks of the Ivy League. Knowing their names, and their work, is necessary to keep what’s benevolent about where we study.

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GUEST COLUMNIST
HRISHITA SHAH

A table for one, please

There is something sacred about the Yale dining hall. It is a place where the University’s intellectual and social diversity truly comes to life, stripped of the formality of the seminar table or the hierarchy of the extracurricular board.

Meal culture is the heartbeat of this campus. Within the span of my first week here, I found myself sharing a meal with a competitive ice skater, a chess prodigy and an aspiring doctor. These are the “simply because” meals. They started with a quick text or a casual “we should get a meal,” and ended two hours later with a bowl of ice cream and a new best friend. My first real roots here were planted in those long, sprawling dinners where the conversation drifted from the ethics of artificial intelligence to the best place for late-night pizza.

But in our celebration of the communal, we have inadvertently cultivated a quiet, pervasive fear of eating alone.

I didn’t realize how deeply I had internalized this until a Tuesday afternoon when I saw my Google Calendar was unexpectedly blank. I hadn’t scheduled a meal. As I walked into the Silliman dining hall, a strange wariness took over. I found myself glancing around, checking the room for witnesses to my solitude. I didn’t just sit down to eat; I engaged in a frantic choreography of busyness. I chose a seat in the far corner, tucked against a window. I unsheathed my laptop with purpose. I put on my headphones, unsure of what — or whether — music was

even playing. I even pulled a book out of my bag for extra intellectual weight. If someone saw me, I wanted the narrative to be clear: This is a working lunch. I am far too occupied with my high-stakes academic life to bother with company.

I spent those thirty minutes scrolling through my phone with a forced, performative nonchalance. But then, as I looked up from my screen, the artifice began to crumble.

I realized that not one person was looking at me.

In the high-speed whirlwind of Yale, we often spend so much energy framing ourselves for the imagined gazes of our peers that we forget to actually live in the moments we are curating. I had spent my entire lunch viewing myself through the lens of other people’s supposed judgment, and in the process, I hadn’t tasted a single bite of my food.

This realization leads to uncomfortable questions. If we aren’t comfortable with ourselves, how can we expect anyone else to be truly comfortable with us? If we cannot enjoy our own company for a 20-minute lunch, are we truly connecting with others, or are we just using them to avoid the silence of our own thoughts?

Yale is a place of relentless velocity. We are constantly encouraged to be social, to be productive, to be engaged. But a table for one offers something that a table for eight cannot: a chance to slow down. It is a moment of necessary stillness in an environment that otherwise demands constant motion. When

we treat eating alone as a stigma, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to check in with the person we spend

WHEN WE TREAT EATING ALONE AS A STIGMA, WE ROB OURSELVES OF THE OPPORTUNITY TO CHECK IN WITH THE PERSON WE SPEND THE MOST TIME WITH — OURSELVES.

the most time with — ourselves.

We should continue to cherish the spontaneous dinners and the three-hour brunch debates. They are the core of the Yale experience. But we must also dismantle the idea that a solitary chair is a sign of social rejection. It is, if we allow it to be, a sign of self-sufficiency.

Embrace Yale’s meal culture. But when you happen to chance upon a meal alone, embrace that too. I’m still learning how.

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GUEST COLUMNIST
WILLIAM BARBEE

Conserving conversation at Yale

Yale stands at an inflection point regarding the future of the University. The identity of the American academy has eroded over time to the point where a majority of our fellow citizens have lost faith in the trajectory of higher education. The Yale administration has dutifully responded with a number of initiatives — including the Committee on Institutional Voice, Committee on Trust in Higher Education and the Center for Civic Thought — to address this growing crisis. But the problems stem deeper than mere bureaucratic reorganization. We, especially students, must reclaim the roots of what it means to attend Yale so that the tree of our austere institution can flourish.

The purpose of my column is to cast out seeds with the hope that a few might germinate in the minds of university leaders. As one of the leading voices in the conservative movement on campus, I believe I stand on firm ground to offer constructive criticism of the university — criticism that stems from a place not of contempt, but of admiration. If Yale is to persist as an institution of veneration, it must recognize its own shortcomings and address them with the rigor, tact and elegance that ought to be expected of an Ivy League university.

This process of reconciliation can only begin from the place where all great things at Yale first originate: conversation. And, regrettably, the state of conversation at our university today is sorely lacking.

I recently attended a debate hosted by the Buckley Institute, an organization for which I previously served as student president, on the American immigration crisis, entitled, “Resolved: Mass Deportation Is Necessary.” The debaters — one the Director of Immigration Studies at the Cato Institute, the other a former acting Secretary of Homeland Security — sparred for an hour on topics ranging from the feasibility of immigration reform to the economics of mass deportation to the executive orders of President Trump.

I was impressed by the candor

of the Buckley Institute’s guests in their discussion of such a monumental and controversial topic. Yet, upon leaving the event, I could not help but feel a sense of disappointment in my fellow audience members — not due to their reactions, but due to their lack thereof.

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Seated in the second row from the front, I watched as not a steady flow, but a sporadic trickle of guests came through the doors of our WLH classroom to attend a debate on what is likely the most hotly-contested issue of our time. Instead of throngs of students lining College Street for miles, waiting to have their opinions shaped by leading figures in the field, this event was greeted with a half-empty auditorium of Buckley Fellows, curious newcomers and the occasional New Haven resident. The seats which event organizers hoped to be taken up within minutes were left overwhelmingly spare.

I will venture the opinion that the Yale administration would have benefitted from making attendance at this event a graduation requirement for all students. Since Yale has made engagement with the body politic its central mission as an institution — if the “For Humanity” campaign’s stated goal means

anything, it is to make Yale more public-minded — it must prioritize the dissemination of ideas from across the political spectrum, especially those that are opposed to one another.

How will students be able to fight for a more just, sound immigration system if they do not understand those against whom they fight? “Cultivating Conversations” workshops, for all the benevolent intentions behind them, are inadequate. Students require real exposure to real ideas from real leaders in a manner that forces both sides to grapple with themselves.

The only guests that seem to solicit attention from Yale students anymore are politicians like Curtis Sliva — and not because of their overwhelming support for third party candidates and reform-based politics. Yalies would prefer to indulge in the words “glaze,” “Gotti,” and “Gambino” than to grapple profoundly with pressing political questions. It is the reason why Yale Political Union debates experience an exodus of students following the speech by the guest; it is the reason why the Buckley debate struggled to gain traction; and it is the reason why the American people distrust our university.

That is why I call upon the University to do what this column proposes and conserve conversations — at least those that already take place. If the only loci for public debates on campus are to be the Buckley Institute and YPU, then Yale must do everything in its power to ensure the perpetuation and flourishing of those institutions. From accessible funds for security and police presence at events to exclusive, designated auditoriums for debate, the university has the means to elevate its reputation as a leading institution for the free exchange of ideas. All it takes is the impetus to seize them, forever changing the trajectory of our university and our nation.

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