

Yale Gives In to the Grievance Culture

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On Tuesday, November 17, Yale University president Peter Salovey sent an email addressed to “Members of the Yale Community,” including the university’s far flung alumni. In the wake of unrest on campus the last few weeks over Halloween costumes, “safe spaces,” diversity, and free speech, Salovey expressed his determination “to build a more inclusive Yale.” Many of his conciliatory words were the right ones, but the measures he subsequently announced—and those he has apparently declined to undertake—represent capitulation to forces eroding liberal education at Yale.

Despite decades of efforts to cultivate diversity on campus, Salovey asserts that the university has fallen considerably short: “It is clear that we need to make significant changes so that all members of our community truly feel welcome,” he said, “and can participate equally in the activities of the university, and to reaffirm and reinforce our commitment to a campus where hatred and discrimination have no place.”

Yale’s president hastens to add that this devotion to diversity and inclusivity is not inconsistent with its “commitment to free speech, which is unshakeable.” Yale’s purpose, he insists, is first and foremost education: “to engage in teaching, learning, and research—to study and think together, sometimes to argue with and challenge one another, even at the risk of discord, but always to take care to preserve our ability to learn from one another.”

In contrast to his belief that Yale’s record on diversity is seriously flawed, Salovey finds his university’s devotion to free speech exemplary: “Yale’s long history, even in these past two weeks, has shown a steadfast devotion to full freedom of expression.”

This is wrong. Indifference to free speech is commonplace at Yale. So is ignorance about what that principle requires. In some quarters of the university—those that stand to be rewarded most by Yale’s extraordinary efforts to promote diversity and inclusivity—freedom of speech is sometimes treated with scorn. The measures Salovey is announcing will make a bad situation worse.

The Salovey plan presents initiatives in “four key areas.”

First, Yale will develop a “transformative, multi-disciplinary center” to study “race, ethnicity, and other aspects of social identity.” This is on top of “a \$50 million, five-year, university-wide initiative” announced earlier in the month to “enhance faculty diversity.”

Second, along with increased financial aid for low-income students, Yale will expand financial support for its four cultural centers: the Afro-American Cultural Center, the Asian American Cultural Center, La Casa Cultural, and the Native American Cultural Center.

Third, Yale will introduce a sweeping program—including “department chairs, directors of graduate and undergraduate studies, masters and deans, student affairs staff, and others across the university”—to educate the Yale community about “about race, ethnicity, diversity, and inclusion.” The remedial education will begin at the top. “I, along with the vice presidents, deans, provosts, and other members of the administration, will receive training on recognizing and combating racism and other forms of discrimination in the academy,” Salovey wrote.

Fourth, Yale will broaden “the visible representations” of minorities on campus as it has of women in recent years through increasing the number of portraits of women on display at the university and commissioning works of public art that celebrate their role.

According to Salovey, even these multiple and costly initiatives—which follow up on a multiplicity of previous costly initiatives—will not be nearly enough. Therefore, he is “creating a presidential task force representing all constituencies to consider other projects and policies” whose purpose will be “to create a fully inclusive campus.”

This is incredible. There is no telling how many tens of millions of dollars and how many tens of thousands of labor hours Yale has devoted during the last 50 years to increasing the number of women and minorities throughout the university, addressing their perceived needs, and advising the rest of the campus community to accommodate their wishes. Yet the spirit of resentment at Yale has deepened. On reflection, that’s no accident.

Programs that study race, ethnicity, and social identity of the sort Salovey is dramatically expanding tend to be highly politicized and are almost ensured to foster a culture of grievance. They generally proceed from the premise that inequality and injustice are not only rife in America but belong among the nation’s distinguishing features. They promote advocacy of social justice, progressively understood, rather than skeptical and rigorous analysis that confronts public policy from a variety of critical perspectives. They treat conservatives and conservative ideas as part of the problem and unwelcome in their domain and deliberations. Their self-professed goal is to change the world rather than to understand it.

Salovey’s message to the Yale community is as notable for the critical reforms it omits as it is for the redundant and pandering measures it puts forward. Courses at Yale on race, ethnicity, and gender have proliferated over the last several decades even as courses grow scarce on subjects such as the principles of constitutional self-government, the intellectual foundations of free markets, diplomacy, and military history.

Sensitivity training in its many guises is pervasive, but the university leadership apparently does not think it is necessary for all students to study the history of liberty of thought and discussion, much less establish a center for the study and practice of free speech. Encouraged by the Obama administration Department of Education, Yale has hollowed out due process protections in campus sexual assault cases, while seeing no need to require students to master the bedrock elements of justice in liberal democracies.

President Salovey's assurance that Yale's commitment to freedom of speech is "unshakeable," is belied by the content of his message to the Yale community. Yale's leader promises massive amounts of time, energy, and money to promote an outlook that has a history of despising dissent and offers not a cent or second to fostering an understanding of free speech and its indissoluble connection with liberal education.

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