

## FAS-SEAS Senate Statement on Institutional Voice

*January 16, 2025*

On October 27, 2024 the Yale Committee on Institutional Voice, appointed by university president Maurie McInnis, issued a report to address the question of how Yale, as an institution, should comment on the issues of the day. In a national climate shaped by political polarization, critique of institutions of higher education, and increased scrutiny of public comments in an era of rapid social media exchange, many universities have adopted policies of restraint or neutrality in institutional speech.

Following significant criticism of Harvard's handling of responses to the Israel-Hamas conflict, for example, in May 2024 Harvard's administration released a report stating that the "university and its leaders should not...issue official statements about public matters that do not directly affect the university's core function." The University of Pennsylvania has implemented a similar policy; the University of Michigan's Board of Regents voted to formalize institutional neutrality as a bylaw; and other universities such as Stanford and Columbia have also begun to limit or reconsider institutional responses to external events.

The two models implicitly or explicitly invoked in these contemporary debates emerged during politically tense times more than half a century ago: the Woodward report (advocating for "unfettered freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable") drafted at Yale in 1974, and the 1967 University of Chicago Kalven report (stating that the "instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual faculty member or the individual student," not the institution as represented by its leaders). While the ethos of the Kalven report has in some sense prevailed nationally, the Yale FAS-SEAS Senate has been heartened and relieved to find in the wording of Yale's own committee report careful and profound differences from the new policies emerging from peer institutions. The Yale Committee's full statement on Institutional Voice deftly addresses the pressures faced by university leadership in our own global present while remaining true to the fundamental principles of the Woodward report.

While joining peer institutions in advocating that university leaders *mostly* refrain from making statements concerning "matters of public, social, or political significance," the Yale report crucially maintains that their main recommendation is that "university leaders exercise their *best institutional judgment*" on when speech is necessary, such as in matters of "transcendent importance" or pertaining to the university's core mission. "University leaders may be obligated to speak to defend the university's core values or concrete interests as expressed in the University's motto, '*Lux et Veritas*,'" the report states, and calls on university leaders of all levels to exercise *phronesis*—a term from ancient Greek philosophy meaning "practical intelligence or wisdom, or discernment." The room left for interpretation by such wording is ample and empowering.

The Yale FAS-SEAS Senate issues this statement in support of the work of our faculty colleagues in drafting a policy for Yale that ultimately honors the institution's commitment to unfettered intellectual freedom. We aim to emphasize the subtlety and significance of the Yale

report to our faculty colleagues, to our students, and to university leaders—as details are often lost in summaries and media coverage; and as misreadings might dampen necessary and open debates on our campus. Because the nuanced report provides wide latitude in practice, we will follow carefully how the university chooses to use its voice and whether internal voices continue to be able to express themselves. We end by drawing attention to the committee’s carefully chosen but clear words—“we emphasize that we have *not* recommended that the university adopt a position of institutional neutrality”—and laud the example set by the report of *phronesis* in practice.