

Alison Winters
Former News Editor, *The Vanderbilt Hustler*
ACP Reporter of the Year Portfolio

News Story: LGBTQ+ Policy Lab reports \$9.6M loss in federal funding following NIH cuts
<https://vanderbilthustler.com/2025/05/05/lgbtq-policy-lab-reports-9-6m-loss-in-federal-funding-following-nih-cuts/>

Feature Story: Vanderbilt community reflects on life and legacy of Reverend James Lawson
<https://vanderbilthustler.com/2024/07/28/vanderbilt-community-reflects-on-life-and-legacy-of-reverend-james-lawson/>

Additional Story 1: Students, faculty and community members rally in support of science, medical research funding
<https://vanderbilthustler.com/2025/03/14/students-faculty-and-community-members-rally-in-support-of-science-medical-research-funding/>

Additional Story 2: University leaders condemn government oversight in AAC&U letter, Vanderbilt administration not listed
<https://vanderbilthustler.com/2025/04/28/university-leaders-condemn-government-oversight-in-aacu-letter-vanderbilt-administration-not-listed/>

Alison Winters

www.linkedin.com/in/alison-a-winters/ | alison.a.winters@vanderbilt.edu | 469-406-2814 | She/Her

EDUCATION

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

August 2021 – May 2025

Bachelor of Arts: Political Science and Law, History, and Society | **Minor:** Psychology | GPA 3.7/4.0

Vanderbilt Dean's List: Spring 2022, Fall 2022, Spring 2024, Fall 2024

Relevant courses: International Politics, Constitutional Law, American Democracy and Dissent, Elections and Voting Around the World, Public Administration, Political Strategy and Game Theory, Feminist Theory, Justice, Environmental Journalism, Statistics, Macroeconomics

IES Vienna, Vienna, Austria

August 2023 – December 2023

Coursework: International Organizations, Europe Beyond the Nation State, Arts Criticism, Austrian Art and History, German Language Intensive

EXPERIENCE

Intern | *Nashville Metropolitan Council Member Terry Vo* | Nashville, TN

January 2024 – October 2024

- Worked as the executive assistant to city council member Terry Vo, enabling her to focus on key initiatives and community needs.
- Efficiently oversaw scheduling and appointments, ensuring optimal use of time and resources.
- Provided administrative support, such as organizing financial reports, preparing documents, and managing files.
- Coordinated logistics for meetings, including arranging venues, managing invitations, and sending correspondence to guarantee timely appointments, furthering the goals of the city.

Freelance Investigator | *Bloomberg* | Remote, New York City, NY

March 2024 – Present

- Retrieved crucial reports for a long-term news investigation by multiple notable and respected journalists with Bloomberg.
- Efficiently coordinated the communication of essential information between public officials, reporters, and Bloomberg executives.

Volunteer Manager | *Nashville Metropolitan Council Campaign for Terry Vo* | Nashville, TN

June 2023 – August 2023

- Oversaw the management and delegation of 40+ volunteers for community outreach events to encourage undecided voters to vote, volunteer, and support Vo's campaign.
- Planned and organized door knocking events, meet and greets, and campaign fundraisers to drive a successful nonpartisan campaign that swayed over 53.6% of voters on election day.
- Gained experience with campaign strategies, speech writing, event planning, data entry, and administrative support for a local campaign in a district with over 20,200 residents.

Supervisor | *AMC Theatres* | *Supervisor (Aug. 2022); Crew Lead (Nov. 2019 – Aug. 2022)* | Franklin, TN

June 2019 – May 2024

- Led and facilitated a successful and cohesive team at all levels, through training leadership, managing over 100 crew members, and distributing responsibilities to promote smooth operations in a fast-paced environment.
- Provided high-quality guest service to thousands of guests daily by patiently listening and efficiently solving issues that arise.
- Directed daily operations including opening, closing, operational and administrative duties, while providing direct support to associates.

LEADERSHIP

The Vanderbilt Hustler | *News Editor (Dec. 2024 – May 2025); Deputy News Editor (Jan. – Dec. 2024)*

February 2022 – May 2025

- More than 90 articles published concerning current events, breaking news, and changes on and off campus.
- Conducted interviews with relevant sources and perform crucial research to write the most accurate news pieces.
- Led 50+ person staff in weekly meetings and workshops while directing staff writer mentorship and semesterly trainings.
- Daily editing of all news content published by Staff Writers for AP Style, organization, cohesion, accuracy, and content.
- Awarded 2025 Richard J. Stelzer Starter Stipend in honor of high achievement in student journalism.
- **Other awards:** Associated College Press Pacemaker Awards National Winner for General News Reporting; SPJ General News Reporting (large school) National Winner; Best of SNO (6x); 2023 Excellence in Event Coverage; 2024 Excellence in Political Reporting
- **Writing portfolio:** https://vanderbilthustler.com/staff_name/alison-winters/

Vandy Votes | *President (Dec. 2024 – May 2025); Vice President (May - Dec. 2024); Secretary (Jan. - May 2024)*

January 2023 – May 2025

- Managed an executive board of 10+ committee chairs to plan events with local and on-campus organizations, including the annual Middle TN Civic Summit with the TN Democracy Network, voter registration drives, speaker panels, lectures, and volunteering events.
- Led weekly executive board meetings, created agendas, and directed communication/advertisement of events to general body members.
- **Honors/Presentations:** ALL IN 2024 Most Engaged Campus. Presented about creative initiatives at the 2024 Student Vote Summit.

Undergraduate Political Science Association | *Senior Adviser*

January 2023 – May 2025

- Propelled a new student organization into popularity, while promoting lasting connections between faculty and students.
- Organized events in the Political Science Department, including faculty dinners and student mixers.

SKILLS

Technical: Microsoft Office, Google Workspace, Canva, WordPress, writing (creative, journalistic, academic), research & data analysis, data visualization, communication, social media marketing, news reporting, community outreach, legislative analysis

Interests: contemporary film, reading & writing opinion essays, crossword puzzles, investigative journalism, local politics

Other languages: Spanish (conversational), German (basic)

LGBTQ+ Policy Lab reports \$9.6M loss in federal funding following NIH cuts

Three federally funded research projects were effectively terminated due to these cuts, including research in the experiences of older LGBTQ+ Americans, suicide prevention among LGBTQ+ youth and the mental health effects of legalizing same-sex marriage.

By Alison Winters, Former News Editor

The LGBTQ+ Policy Lab reported a total of \$9.6 million lost in federal grants from the National Institutes of Health following recent changes in federal policy, effectively terminating three of the lab's projects. These research projects were all previously funded by five-year federal grants that were intended to provide support until 2029.

Among the terminated federal grants, one project, “Social Networks, Aging and Policy Study” — led by Director of the LGBTQ+ Policy Lab Tara McKay — focuses on understanding the relationships and experiences of older-aged LGBTQ+ individuals in the U.S. South. A second project, led by Medicine, Health and Society professor and Associate Director of the lab Kirsty Clark, worked to develop measures and metrics for suicide prevention among LGBTQ+ adolescents, with a primary focus on ages 8 to 12.

The last project was in its early stages of development, and it planned to focus on the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals in New Zealand before and after access to same-sex marriage. The third project was cut completely, while the other two are currently seeking other sources of funding.

According to McKay, the lab began in 2017 under a three-year federal grant and has been renewed for federal funding on two different five-year contracts — the current agreement would have provided funding until 2029. The goal of the lab is to provide an “intellectual space” for LGBTQ+ research and training in that research, and the lab has provided opportunities for its core faculty — primarily within the Department of Medicine, Health and Society — as well as for undergraduate, graduate and postdoctoral researchers.

Cameron Deal (B.A. '24), a former research assistant in the lab, expressed gratitude for the work he was able to do through the LGBTQ+ Policy Lab and the faculty who helped him.



George Albu

The front area for the Center for Research on Inequality and Health at Vanderbilt University, as photographed on April 28, 2025. (Hustler Multimedia/George Albu)

“The LGBTQ+ Policy Lab was an invaluable space for me to grow as a scholar, and I deeply appreciate the mentorship and training I received there. The lab shaped me into the researcher I am today,” Deal said. “Their work is rigorous and important for solving pressing social issues, including disparities in health and economic outcomes, and deserves funding and support.”

Terminated projects

McKay specified that the funding of the terminated projects was used to support the research itself as well as to pay the postdoctoral researchers who worked in the lab, particularly in Clark’s lab.

“Everyone’s hopeful that the university will step up and provide support for some of these continuing data collections or research pieces that we’re losing,” McKay said. “It will not be at the scale that is lost, and a lot of what is also lost is training opportunities.”

In a letter sent to Associate Director for Proposals & Awards Michelle Wachter on Feb. 28, Jeni Militano — branch chief for the Division of Neuroscience in the NIA and NIH — described the termination of the grant for McKay’s project, saying the “award no longer effectuates agency priorities.” The letter acknowledged that the NIH typically suspends grants first to allow for “corrective action” before an award is fully terminated, but Militano said no such action was possible in the case of McKay’s project as it did not align with agency priorities.

“[The] NIH is obligated to carefully steward grant awards to ensure taxpayer dollars are used in ways that benefit the American people and improve their quality of life,” the letter reads. “Your project does not satisfy these criteria.”

The letter also called attention to the inclusion of transgender individuals in McKay’s study.

“Transgender issues: research programs based on gender identity are often unscientific, have little identifiable return on investment and do nothing to enhance the health of many Americans,” the letter reads. “Many such studies ignore, rather than seriously examine, biological realities. It is the policy of NIH not to prioritize these research programs.”

McKay explained that the LGBTQ+ lab will continue to perform research on its smaller, internally-funded projects, but she expressed worry for the outcome these funding cuts may have considering the potential benefits she believes these terminated projects could have had on the LGBTQ+ community.

“Across the field of LGBTQ+ health — [which has] been really substantially targeted by these terminations, there have been a lot of concerns with the very rapid withdrawal of resources and patient care that’s happening in certain settings,” McKay said.

McKay also said that she is concerned about the fact that the termination of this funding for the lab will result in a decrease in research opportunities for students within the space of LGBTQ+ health.

“We’ll lose folks that I think would otherwise have worked in this space who just don’t see it as a viable option or see it as way too politically unstable or too risky for their career,” McKay said.

In a March 22 LinkedIn post, Clark discussed the \$2.5 million grant that had been cut from her own project, citing the reasoning she received in the termination letter as wording echoed in the letter received by McKay. Clark declined The Hustler’s request for comment about the grant for her project. According to McKay, the postdoctoral researchers involved in Clark’s project are at risk of losing their positions by July 1.

“There are no words to describe the devastation I feel. I have worked my entire career on research to understand and prevent suicide in LGBTQ+ youth,” Clark’s LinkedIn post reads. “Whether or not you choose to believe it, sexual and gender minority children, teens and families exist. They deserve to be included in our research. Without data, we don’t know how to prevent harm. We can’t prevent deaths.”

NIH appeal process and university response

In the letter, Militano also described the NIH’s first-level grant appeal process in which a researcher could dispute the termination claim, although McKay said Vanderbilt informed faculty that they cannot file appeals to the NIH.

“Vanderbilt has decided not to appeal. All of the [Principal Investigators] want to appeal, and none of them have support from the institution,” McKay said. “I’ve made it very clear to [the Office of the Provost] that I think there are a lot of very good reasons to appeal — and I had worked with them to start an appeal, and ultimately, the decision was made and taken away from me that they would not be appealing.”

A representative from the university provided a statement to The Hustler on behalf of the Office of the Provost, expressing support for federally funded research. The statement also cited the recent launch of the Discovery Bridge Funding Program, which provides short-term financial assistance — typically for three to six months — to some faculty researchers who “face unexpected funding disruptions.” According to McKay, both she and Clark have applied for funding through this program.

“Having led a federally funded research lab for over 20 years, the Provost cares deeply about supporting faculty to do their best work,” the statement reads. “The Office of the Provost is fiercely focused on providing transitional funding, administrative resources and guidance so faculty may continue pursuing their best work, whether it is in the sciences, engineering, the humanities or the arts.”

The Office of the Provost also shared its view on the appeal process.

“We have taken care to strategically address the specific needs and requirements of each grant or award facing termination as each case is unique, and appeal is not always possible,” the statement reads. “In cases where an appeal may be possible, we work with the faculty member to navigate a complex set of decisions and options. We also continue to support faculty to identify additional opportunities for federal, foundation or private research funding.”

According to the statement, Provost C. Cybele Raver encouraged faculty facing challenges due to federal funding cuts to reach out to her office as well as to their home college’s associate dean for research.

In an email to The Hustler on May 2, McKay provided an update on the funding of these projects, saying her own project was denied bridge funding by the College of Arts and Science, which is required to be eligible for funding from the Office of the Provost. She also said Clark has opened a bridge funding application, and the lab is currently working to cover staff salaries using other sources.

“In addition, in April, A&S cancelled a tenure track search focused on hiring a junior scholar specializing in LGBTQ+ health,” McKay said. “Unfortunately, these actions seem to suggest a pattern by the current Dean’s Office of disengagement of LGBTQ+ scholarship on campus.”

Vanderbilt community reflects on life and legacy of Reverend James Lawson

Lawson, a civil rights activist, died earlier this summer at age 95.

By Alison Winters, Deputy News Editor

Reverend James Lawson (Boston University, '60) — renowned civil rights activist and former Vanderbilt student — died on June 9, 2024, at the age of 95. Lawson was an active leader of the civil rights movement, and he was expelled from Vanderbilt in 1960 following his participation in sit-in protests in Nashville. Lawson was a close advisor to Martin Luther King Jr. He led workshops to train activists, including John Lewis and Diane Nash, in the art of nonviolent protest — resulting in Nashville becoming the first major city in the South with a desegregated downtown area.

Lawson was born on Sept. 22, 1928, in Ohio, where he earned a preacher's license during high school. He was a dedicated pacifist and worked as a Methodist pastor in Memphis, Tenn., in 1962, after completing his theology degree at Boston University in 1960. Lawson's wife, Dorothy Wood Lawson, worked as an organizer for the NAACP until the two moved to Los Angeles in 1974. There, Lawson continued to work as a pastor and contribute to civil rights movements, involving himself with the labor movement as part of the ACLU as well as movements promoting reproductive choice and LGBTQ+ rights.



George Albu

Crucifix at the top of the spire at Benton Chapel, as photographed on Nov. 30, 2023. (Hustler Multimedia/George Albu)

James Lawson Institute

In 2022, Lawson helped to launch the James Lawson Institute for the Research and Study of Nonviolent Movements at Vanderbilt. As a partnership between the Divinity School and the College of Arts and Science, the JLI was formed to promote research and education on nonviolent movements, foster partnerships with the Nashville community and support the next generation of peaceful activists.

The JLI was founded to continue Lawson's legacy and promote his values of nonviolence and social change in a faith-based context. Phillis Isabella Sheppard has served as the inaugural director of the institute since its formation.

"Most of us experience this loss in a very powerful way — on a personal level but also with the impact it has on the movement," Sheppard said. "I think these kinds of losses can stall a movement or propel a movement and keep it going."

Sheppard expressed deep gratitude for the work that Lawson accomplished during his life, and she believes the JLI will continue to carry on his legacy in promoting nonviolent resistance.

"The bigger question is 'how does the Institute continue to deepen its roots at the university?'" Sheppard said. "For me, that includes 'how do we continue to teach the practice of nonviolent direct action? How do we continue to do the research?'"

Lawson's legacy

Lawson continued his work in the pursuit of nonviolent resistance throughout his career, hosting training sessions to promote peaceful protest strategies until his death. He taught at Vanderbilt as a Distinguished Professor from 2006 to 2009 and donated his papers to the Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries' Special Collection in 2013. Lawson also led the Civil Discourse and Social Change initiative at California State University Northridge as a visiting faculty member in 2010 and taught a course on nonviolent movements there for almost 14 years.

Professor Dennis Dickerson — the Reverend James M. Lawson Chair in History — said he shared a long relationship with Lawson and admired his strong loyalty to his faith and moral values. Dickerson described Lawson's commitment to the nonviolence movement as a "moral crusade."

"I treasure all the interactions I've had with Reverend Lawson as a man of deep moral commitment and someone who is genuinely and internally immersed in the principles and practices of nonviolence," Dickerson said. "It pervades his very being."

Dickerson discussed the grief he felt at learning Lawson had passed, saying it was not unexpected while also reflecting on the pain his loss has left.

"I was personally very sad. I know he was 95, but I still wasn't ready to let him go," Dickerson said. "He was a good man. If you're looking for a blueprint on how to get to heaven, he's your blueprint."

Dickerson specifically recalled hearing about Lawson's arrest in 1960 and his dedication to pursuing justice. Dickerson said Lawson exhibited "determined moral strength" as he accepted the penalty of arrest because he refused to obey what he believed to be an unjust law.

"It's not like this was the result of having lived several decades — this was when he was a youth fresh out of college," Dickerson said. "It's incredible."

Lawson's influence today

In discussing the recent pro-Palestine protests on campus this past spring semester, Dickerson reiterated Lawson's allegiance to his pacifist values, and he said he believes Lawson would have promoted peaceful solutions while maintaining a "mutual affirmation that all life matters."

"Whatever pursuit in which you're engaged, human life has to be respected and protected. That's the important thing," Dickerson said. "Now, people are going to stand on different sides of an issue, and this issue is no different than any other issue. James Lawson would say, 'What's the nonviolent solution?'"

Sheppard said she hopes the protests lead to increased dialogue focused on the direct outcomes students have been pursuing. She highlighted Lawson's encouragement of students to write their wills during his training sessions as he understood the critical risks involved in protest movements. Sheppard said resistance tactics should be chosen for their outcome and effectiveness, and she encouraged protestors to be "in it for the long haul."

"I think that that's something that we could stress more — that we do risk assessments [in our trainings] — that we know what it is we're deciding to do and what the risks involved are," Sheppard said. "Because if there were no risk, there would be no need for, not just protests, but all forms of nonviolent direct action."

VSG Vice President Ellie Kearns, a senior, said that she hopes Vanderbilt students will learn from Lawson's commitment to the nonviolence movement. Her wish is that students will carry on his legacy by continuing to advocate for social change while working to "dismantle the systems of oppression" present in the world today.

"Vanderbilt's expulsion of Reverend Lawson marked a dark time in our school's history. Inappropriately and/or disproportionately punishing student protestors, including James Lawson, has not promoted peace, order or justice," Kearns said in a message to The Hustler. "I hope that the current administration will truly honor James Lawson's contribution to the civil rights movement and broader social justice activism by encouraging nonviolent student activism, protecting students' due process rights and practicing restorative justice principles when necessary during student disciplinary proceedings."

In emphasizing the importance of continuing Lawson's work, Sheppard encouraged people to reflect on the role of higher education in creating spaces for dialogue between differing points of view.

"I think that the commitment to continuing the work of Reverend Lawson has to become crucial, not just because we have an institute, but because we have a world that is, as [Lawson] would say, hell-bent on violence," Sheppard said.

Dickerson echoed the significance of Lawson's legacy, inviting students to advocate for what they believe in while pursuing nonviolent solutions.

"Stand for something, and with what you stand for, make sure that whatever your position is that it affirms and values human beings. And in the pursuit of those things that you believe in, make sure you do no harm to anyone," Dickerson said. "That's his legacy."

Students, faculty and community members rally in support of science, medical research funding

The rally was organized as a part of a nationwide day of protest against President Donald Trump's executive orders to halt federal funding.

By Alison Winters, News Editor

Approximately 250 students, faculty and local community members rallied at the Tennessee State Capitol on March 7 to protest against President Donald Trump's executive orders to cut the federal workforce and halt federal funding to scientific research. This event was hosted as a part of a nationwide day of protest titled "Stand Up for Science," with the main rally held in Washington, D.C.

The rally was organized by students and staff at Vanderbilt University Medical School and other local universities, as well as by local community members. Speakers — including organizers, VUMS students and researchers, Tennessee State Senator Heidi Campbell and State Representative Aftyn Behn (D-Nashville) — called attention to the National Institutes of Health's proposed reduction of funding for "indirect costs," ongoing pauses to federal grants directed toward scientific research, online misinformation about vaccines and executive orders to limit initiatives promoting diversity, equity and inclusion.

Kelly Taylor, a genetic counselor at VUMC, opened the rally by discussing the role of medical research funding in developing lifesaving cures, as well as her belief in the importance of DEI initiatives to this work. In a conversation with The Hustler, Taylor said she chose to take part in organizing the rally out of concern for the impact the federal research funding cuts will have on her patients.

"I have been in this field for over 30 years, so I have seen how important publicly funded research is for helping patients," Taylor said. "I have been really disheartened by the cuts that the administration is making and how I foresee it's going to impact scientific research and medical breakthroughs, and felt like I had to do something."

Protestors held signs promoting scientific research and condemning the cuts to federal funding with phrases like "fund science like you fund war" and "we've regressed beyond the mean." Chants included "fund public health, not corporate wealth," "facts over fear" and "cite your sources." Several chants called out Trump, Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and businessman and head of the Department of Government Efficiency Elon Musk.



George Albu

A man holding up two signs at the Stand Up for Science demonstration by the Tennessee State Capitol, as photographed on March 7, 2025. (Hustler Multimedia/George Albu)

Campbell and Behn both expressed gratitude for the protestors who attended the rally, and Behn encouraged attendees to host similar rallies in the future in support of science and medical research funding.

"We promise you all that we will continue to fight — we will continue to show up, and you have to continue to show up, as well," Behn said.

Professor of Medicine Sheila Collins volunteered to speak at the end of the rally and reflected on her childhood. She shared her experience contracting diseases, including measles and chickenpox, that now have vaccines and urged protestors to advocate for innovation in the medical field.

"One thing I think this country is forgetting and that we have to act on is that Congress has the power," Collins said. "We need to remind all of our representatives and senators that they have a responsibility and they cannot be weak in this particular moment."

In a conversation with *The Hustler*, PhD candidate Reilly Fankhauser voiced his frustration toward the federal funding cuts while acknowledging the limitations the university faces in using the endowment to replace these deficits.

"I think it's time for all of us to show up today and try to support science, because the funding cuts have already hit and they've come in very quickly — most noticeably indirect costs already being slashed at the NIH, and they fund all of our infrastructure facilities," Fankhauser said.

Fankhauser also said he believes the pause on reviewing and funding grants will have the biggest effect on doctoral trainees.

"We don't know when [federal agencies will] continue to review grants," Fankhauser said. "I submitted one back in August, and it got a really good score — nearly a perfect score, but it hasn't been funded yet because we've delayed any meetings to actually adjudicate where we're going to send funds."

PhD candidate Allie Lake and postdoctoral researcher Katherine Stefanski were a part of the team who organized the rally. Lake told *The Hustler* that she was driven by fears surrounding the federal funding cuts.

"I am not normally an organizer or an activist, per se, but I was very concerned about what was going on, and I felt like there was a lot of silence, and I think everyone was scared," Lake said. "I think everyone was so dumbfounded that no one really knew what to do or say. I mean, this is not controversial, [so I said], 'We should get together and have a heart for science.' Then I found out it was already being organized on a national level from the D.C. team."

Lake also expressed appreciation for the people who showed up in support of the rally.

"It was honestly beyond what I expected — it definitely exceeded my expectations," Lake said. "First we had 70 people sign up, and then a couple days later, we had 200. I was very pleased with the turnout."

Stefanski shared her motivation for organizing the rally.

"I'm a future independent scientist, and that right now is being threatened by funding cuts, so I'm basically fighting for my job," Stefanski said. "I do biomedical research, and the whole point of biomedical research is to bring cures to diseases for people who don't have any hope right now, and that work has to continue for those people."

University leaders condemn government oversight in AAC&U letter, Vanderbilt administration not listed

Over 400 leaders of universities and scholarly organizations signed a public statement expressing their disapproval of recent federal policy changes and cuts to federal research funding.

By Alison Winters, News Editor

The American Association of Colleges and Universities published a public statement on April 22 titled “A Call for Constructive Engagement,” criticizing recent federal policy changes that have affected institutions of higher education and have led to research funding cuts. As of publication, 514 leaders of colleges, universities and scholarly societies have signed in support of the letter — no Vanderbilt administrators are listed.

The letter specifically calls attention to the “unprecedented government overreach” and “political interference” the signatories believe to be threatening higher education as a whole.

“We are open to constructive reform and do not oppose legitimate government oversight,” the letter reads. “However, we must oppose undue government intrusion in the lives of those who learn, live and work on our campuses. We will always seek effective and fair financial practices, but we must reject the coercive use of public research funding.”

The letter emphasizes a belief in higher education as a space for “open inquiry” and a diversity of voices to be heard. The letter also notes the importance of universities and colleges to “American prosperity” as they believe these institutions should partner with the government to promote the interests of the public.

“The price of abridging the defining freedoms of American higher education will be paid by our students and our society,” the letter reads. “On behalf of our current and future students, and all who work at and benefit from our institutions, we call for constructive engagement that improves our institutions and serves our republic.”



REUTERS/via SNO Sites/Kent Nishimura

A demonstrator speaks through a megaphone during a Defend Our Schools rally to protest U.S. President Donald Trump's executive order to shut down the U.S. Department of Education, outside its building in Washington, D.C., U.S., March 21, 2025. REUTERS/Kent Nishimura

A representative from the university shared the following statement in response to a request for comment regarding the AAC&U letter.

“Over the last weeks, we have been actively engaged in personal advocacy, with and without university partners,” the statement reads. “We are also working through our primary association, the Association of American Universities, to advocate on behalf of America’s leading research universities. Last week the AAU issued a statement in support of Harvard [University].”

Provost Raver signed on as a declarant to a Feb. 10 lawsuit against funding cuts for indirect costs that were announced by the National Institutes of Health. In an April 10 interview with *The Hustler*, Chancellor Daniel Diermeier did not comment on Raver’s position as a declarant, but he spoke on the effects of federal funding cuts and policy changes on higher education, emphasizing a belief in distinguishing between issues that are core to the university’s mission and those that are not.

“I think finding solutions is important for us, so we are actively engaged with decision makers, public officials and our peers,” Diermeier said. “It is important for us to remind everybody of the tremendous value that American research universities have for the public.”

Leaders from other peer institutions signed on to the letter, including Harvard President Alan M. Garber, Brown University President Christina Paxson, Cornell University President Michael Kotlikoff, Acting President of Columbia University Claire Shipman and University of Notre Dame President Reverend Robert Dowd. Based on the U.S. News list of Best National University Rankings, the leaders of 12 out of the top 20 schools signed in support of the AAC&U’s public statement. Vanderbilt is listed as a current member of the AAC&U.

In a conversation with *The Hustler*, Vivian Valdmanis (Ph.D. ‘86) shared her belief in the nuance behind Vanderbilt’s decision not to sign the letter, expressing interest in seeing higher education as a whole take a unified stand while understanding the power Harvard administration has backing their decision to publicly refuse an order from the federal government.

“It’s a shame that not every university is sticking together, but I am also wondering what universities can stick their necks out. Harvard can — they’re really rich,” Valdmanis said. “Schools that don’t have a big research presence can [resist] because they’re not getting the big research dollars anyways. I think those are the questions universities have to ask among themselves in saying, ‘let’s be clear what we want and what we can do and how we can work together.’”

Valdmanis also cited recent movements by faculty at Big 10 universities to form a joint defense pact as she sees an opportunity for Vanderbilt to do the same within the SEC, saying this could be another avenue to stand against the Trump administration outside of the AAC&U letter. She believes university policies have been hard to determine given the constant changes within the federal policy environment.

“That’s the hard thing: nobody knows. [These federal decisions] are not set in stone, they are [being decided on] a whim,” Valdmanis said. “I can’t see policy at the university level being [decided] when it’s a whim — it has to be very malleable.”

Steven Giles (B.S. ‘80) shared his gratitude for the education he received at Vanderbilt in a message to *The Hustler*, saying he has been “mortified” to see the “relentless attacks” by the Trump administration against institutions of higher education. He expressed support towards the AAC&U letter and the need to protect higher education, although he said he was disappointed to see no Vanderbilt administrators in the list of signatories.

“As a proud Vanderbilt alumnus, I eagerly opened the AAC&U letter, confident that Vanderbilt would stand among Harvard’s supporters. After all, are we not the ‘Harvard of the South?’ Are we not one of the world’s premier institutions of higher learning? Are we not a bastion of big ideas and bold vision?” Giles said. “Yet I was aghast to find no mention of Vanderbilt.”

Giles pointed to other universities that signed the letter, including Duke, which he labeled as the university’s “sister institution.”

“The inaction from Vanderbilt’s Chancellor’s Office is nothing short of capitulation,” Giles said. “We all know what happens when you give in to a bully — it doesn’t get better; it gets worse. Much worse. Does the administration truly believe this will be the end of the interference?”

Giles urged the administration to take a stronger stance in support of higher education.

“Why is Vanderbilt not among the 150 schools that signed the letter to defend what is right? I can only guess — but the word craven comes to mind,” Giles said. “To the Vanderbilt administration: do your job. Protect our institution. Stand up for what is right. To students, graduates and alumni: hold Vanderbilt’s leaders accountable for this outrage.”

According to the website, the AAC&U is currently accepting signatures from additional university leaders and will update the website accordingly.