Yale College offers a liberal arts education, one that aims to cultivate a broadly informed, highly disciplined intellect without specifying in advance how that intellect will be used. Such an approach to learning regards college as a phase of exploration, a place for the exercise of curiosity, and an opportunity for the discovery of new interests and abilities. The College does not seek primarily to train students in the particulars of a given career, although some students may elect to receive more of that preparation than others. Instead, its main goal is to instill knowledge and skills that students can bring to bear in whatever work they eventually choose.

This philosophy of education corresponds with that expressed in the Yale Report of 1828, which draws a distinction between "expanding [the mind's] powers, and storing it with knowledge." Acquiring facts is important, but learning how to think critically and creatively in a variety of ways takes precedence.