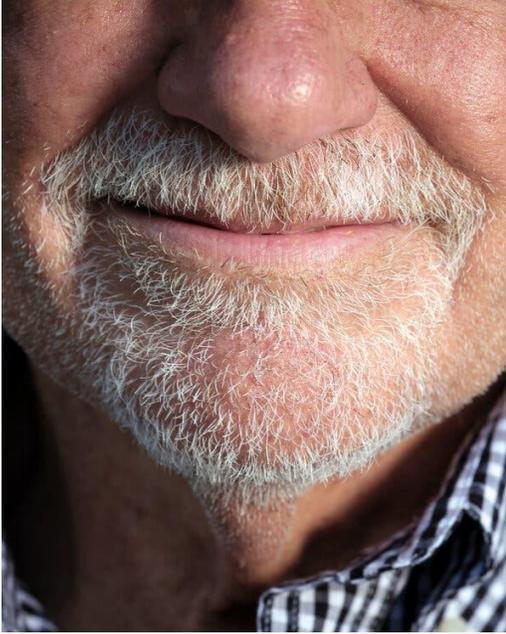


**Beard Crusader: Brigham Young has banned most types of facial hair for decades. One emeritus professor at the university is leading the charge to change that.**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/style/beards-brigham-young-university.html>



*Warner Woodworth, a professor emeritus at Brigham Young University, is petitioning the school to allow beards. Credit...Lindsay D'Addato for The New York Times*



By [Anna P. Kambhampaty](#) Aug. 16, 2021

At Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, beards have been banned on campus [since the rise of the counterculture movement](#), when they were thought to be associated with hippies and antiwar sentiments many young people expressed in the 1960s and '70s.

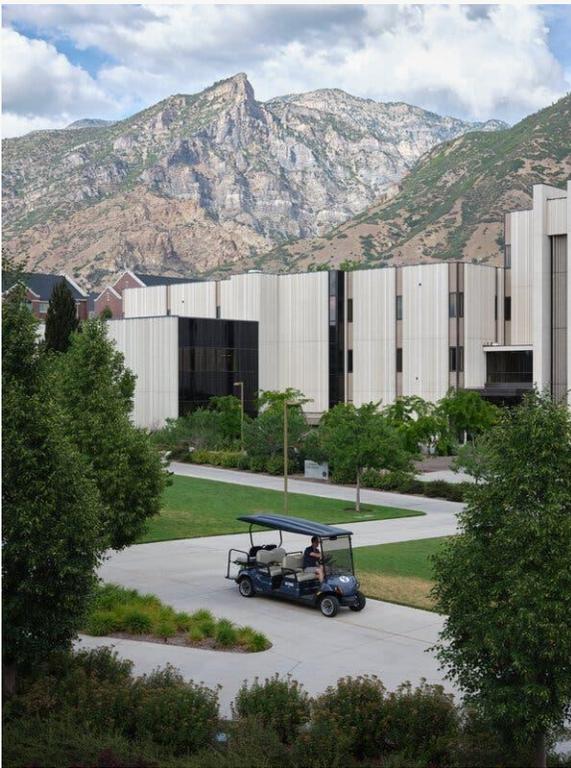
“Men are expected to be clean-shaven; beards are not acceptable,” the school’s [dress and grooming standards](#) state.

Sideburns are allowed, but they “should not extend below the earlobe or onto the cheek.” Mustaches must be “neatly trimmed and may not extend beyond or below the corners of the mouth.” These styles, the standards advise, are “consistent with the dignity adherent to representing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and any of its institutions of higher education.”

Every few years, a group of students band together to try and change this, for the purpose of self-expression or on religious grounds. Now, Warner Woodworth, a Brigham Young University professor emeritus, has taken up the charge. What's novel about Mr. Woodworth's approach is his argument.

“Beards are clearly prophetic,” he wrote in a Change.org [petition](#). “They were used by righteous men from Adam down through the ages.” Having a beard can show righteousness, he wrote — plus, “millions of men globally” wear them.

He added that “while Joseph Smith” — the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — “couldn't grow a good beard, most of his leading Brethren could and did. Nearly all prophets, apostles and others have done so righteously and proudly.”



*At Brigham Young University, beards have been banned on campus since the counterculture era. Credit...Lindsay D'Addato for The New York Times*

### **Beard Waivers and Financial Barriers**

The university's beard ban may never have been intended as permanent. “Our rules against beards and long hair are contemporary and pragmatic,” Dallin H. Oaks said in a 1971 [address to students](#), when he was the president of Brigham Young University. (He is now the first counselor in the first presidency, or top governing body, of the church.)

In the same speech, Mr. Oaks added that beards indicated “protest, revolution and rebellion against authority” and called them “symbols of the hippie and drug culture.”

But he understood that might not always be the case. “The rules are subject to change, and I would be surprised if they were not changed at some time in the future,” he said.

Over the years, the policy has loosened following pressure from students. In 2015, the school [started allowing exceptions](#) for religious reasons.

That decision followed a [study](#) by Brigham Young University professors Ray L. Huntington and Shon D. Hopkin, in which Muslim students on campus were interviewed to understand their perspectives while attending the school.

Two male Muslim students said they “had a difficult time reconciling the prohibition of beards at B.Y.U. with their own cultural expectations regarding facial hair but still followed the rules and were clean-shaven,” the researchers wrote. (Some practicing Muslim people make religious vows to never fully shave their beards, and culturally, [Muslim men with facial hair](#) are considered more enlightened and respected.)

The university also now allows exceptions for those with roles in theatrical productions as well as students with pseudofolliculitis barbae, or bumps from ingrown hairs.

But the process of obtaining a beard waiver is tedious, and there can be financial barriers.

“I would get really bad ingrown hairs from shaving, so I was finally like, ‘OK. I’m done with this. Let’s see how easy it is to get this waiver,’” said Ethan Walker, a current graduate student at Brigham Young University.

Last fall, Mr. Walker said that he had to go to the student health center and shave every day for three days in a row to prove he had the condition. He could not get a note from his own doctor, and he was charged about \$70, after insurance. “There are a lot of hoops for something that’s small, but also annoying and painful,” he said.

The beard ban has other unintended — albeit less serious — consequences. “Being clean shaven is kind of a defining trait of a B.Y.U. student. But then, after leaving, a lot of my students grow out their facial hair,” said Kevin John, a professor at Brigham Young’s School of Communications. “A beard then becomes a defining trait of a B.Y.U. grad, because they couldn’t do it before.”

Mr. John said he thought that the “negative stigma” of beards has really disappeared. Now, Mr. John said, beards have “a little bit of an air of distinction about them. I think they have a little bit of professionalism.”



*Mr. Woodworth has included a novel argument in his petition for facial hair: “Beards are clearly prophetic,” he wrote in a Change.org petition. Credit...Lindsay D'Addato for The New York Times*

### **A Proponent of Pandemic Beards**

Over the course of his nearly 40 years teaching at Brigham Young, Mr. Woodworth has served as an adviser for unofficial student beard clubs on several occasions.

“Every five to seven years, a group of male students would come to me and say we want to change the campus culture,” Mr. Woodworth said. “I’d meet with them from time to time and encourage them and listen to them as they described their wishes or interests or passions for having facial hair at this campus.”

In recent months, Mr. Woodworth noticed many men in the congregation at church meetings had beards. Several professors teaching from home had also started to grow out their facial hair. “I finally said ‘OK, I’ll start a petition,’” Mr. Woodworth said.

He was always one to stand up for what he believed in — even if it meant butting heads with the university — so it wasn’t a great surprise to many of Mr. Woodworth’s colleagues that he set the ball rolling this time. “Beards are just one piece of a bigger question of opening up the campus,” he said.

The professor has been a longtime advocate of cultural and racial diversity on campus. Earlier this year, he published an [opinion piece](#) in favor of critical race theory, in a state where legislators were organizing to ban it.

In 2007, he [publicly questioned](#) the choice of Dick Cheney as commencement speaker, and as a Brigham Young student in the 1960s, Mr. Woodworth participated in marches against the Vietnam War.

“We successfully launched several campaigns against various U.S. interventions, including Reagan’s invasion of Grenada, G.H.W. Bush attacking Panama, and the younger Bush, whom we called ‘W,’ regarding his invasion of Iraq, which we rejected as a threat to innocent societies,” he said.

In regards to antiwar rallies on campus, Mr. Woodworth said, “unlike most American universities where huge demonstrations are baked in academic cultures, B.Y.U. has mostly suffered opposition to any national criticisms by its faculty and/or students.”

“Now if we can still get the beard policy changed, perhaps I can stop being a disrupter,” he said.

One month ago, [his petition](#) went live: “Prayers and pleas to restore the beauty of men’s beards has accelerated at Brigham Young University,” it states.

“Thankfully, the LDS Handbook and church newsroom have no negative guidelines regarding facial hair,” it states. “Leaders have long known that becoming a global church involves multiple cultures, realizing that a beard holds different meanings around the world.”

Carri Jenkins, a spokeswoman for Brigham Young University, said in an email in response to the petition: “The Dress and Grooming Standards, which outline how BYU has chosen to represent itself, reflect the highest standards of the university and the Church. All who come to BYU voluntarily commit to uphold these standards as a matter of personal integrity and respect for the university and those who make it possible.”



*The Mormon leader Brigham Young, with beard. Credit...Hulton Archive/Getty Images*

## **Oracular Hair**

The question still remains: Are beards prophetic?

A prophet is defined as a person regarded as an inspired teacher or a proclaimer of God's will. Technically, that designation could be enjoyed by a person of any gender.

But as is the case with other religions, all of the prophets of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been male.

“The L.D.S. Church is very much a patriarchal church, and it has been led by men throughout its history,” said Quincy Newell, a professor of religious studies at Hamilton College. And “as a thing that generally only men are able to sport,” Dr. Newell said, beards are associated with masculinity.

In religions where gender is viewed differently, beards might not have the same symbolic value. “The Shakers, founded by Ann Lee, saw gender in very different ways, and I think, would not say beards are prophetic,” Dr. Newell said. “They had a governing council that was composed of both men and women, and so women had a much larger say in the movement.”

Of course, most Mormons probably aren't trying to sport a beard in order to resemble a prophet. They probably just like them.

Today, there's an effort to be more mainstream within the church, according to Michael E. Nielsen, a professor of psychology and religion at Georgia Southern University. "There's this tension between being part of society but not too much," he said.

That tension is particularly acute for some Mormon women. For example, women at B.Y.U. fought to wear pants in the 1970s and today, some [Mormon women are pushing for better fitting and more comfortable sacred undergarments](#).

But the rules can extend to more arbitrary things: In 2017, caffeinated soda was finally allowed to be sold on B.Y.U.'s campus after over half a century of a ban on sales.

Beards may not have enough respect to be fought for, or accepted, as a norm. But "if we wait two more years and a bunch of new students come into campus and say 'we want to do it,' I'll try again, and I'm sure that someday the change will happen," Mr. Woodworth said. "This is just one more attempt."



[Brigham Young Students Value Their Strict Honor Code. But Not the Harsh Punishments.](#)  
[April 12, 2019](#)