

The Perils of Writing a Provocative Email at Yale

Nicholas and Erika Christakis stepped down from their positions in residential life months after student activists called for their dismissal over a Halloween kerfuffle.



Shannon Stapleton / Reuters

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Last fall, student protesters at Yale University demanded that Professor Nicholas Christakis, an academic star who has successfully mentored Ivy League undergraduates for years, step down from his position as faculty-in-residence at Silliman College, along with his wife, Erika Christakis, who shared in the job's duties.

The protesters had taken offense at an email sent by Erika Christakis.

Dogged by the controversy for months, the couple finally resigned their posts Wednesday. Because the student protests against them were prompted by intellectual speech bearing directly on Erika Christakis's area of academic expertise, the outcome will prompt other educators at Yale to reflect on their own positions and what they might do or say to trigger or avoid calls for their own resignations. If they feel less inclined toward intellectual engagement at Yale, I wouldn't blame them.

Nicholas Christakis will continue on as a tenured Yale faculty member. Erika Christakis, who gave up teaching at Yale last semester, recently published a book, *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups*.

She has no future classes scheduled.

The controversy that culminated in this week's resignations began last October, when Erika Christakis was teaching a Yale class called "Concept of the *Problem Child*."

An expert in early childhood education, she's long been critical of ways that adults deprive children of learning experiences by over-policing their behavior. When Yale administrators sent an all-students email [advising Yalies to avoid](#) "culturally unaware or insensitive choices" when choosing their Halloween costumes, Erika Christakis responded with [an email of her own](#), acknowledging "genuine concerns about cultural and personal representation," lauding the "spirit of avoiding hurt and offense," but questioning whether students were well-served by administrators asserting norms rather than giving them space to shape their own.

"Have we lost faith in young people's capacity—in your capacity—to exercise self-censure, through social norming, and also in your capacity to ignore or reject things that trouble you?" she asked. "What does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgment? Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It's not mine, I know that."

Many students were outraged by the email, particularly a portion that Erika Christakis attributed to her husband: "Nicholas says, if you don't like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other. Free speech and the ability to tolerate offense are the hallmarks of a free and open society."

Student critics responded, in part, by circulating a petition that accumulated scores of signatures from Yale students and alumni. "You ask students to 'look away' if costumes are offensive, as if the degradation of our cultures and people, and the violence that grows out of it is something that we can ignore," the petition stated, adding that "we were told to meet the offensive parties head on, without suggesting any modes or means to facilitate these discussions to promote understanding."

The petition assumes that offensive Halloween costumes beget violence; proceeds as if Nicholas Christakis simply advised students to ignore all offensive costumes; acknowledges in the next clause that, in fact, he also declared, "or tell them you are offended;" and most bizarrely, concludes as if Ivy League students advised to "talk to each other," the most straightforward of human behaviors, somehow need further counsel on "modes or means to facilitate these discussions," as if they are Martians unfamiliar with talking to classmates—even as they put forth a persuasive petition aimed at those same classmates.

Soon after his wife sent her email, Nicholas Christakis found himself standing on a campus quad surrounded by protesters. He attempted to respond in person to their concerns. After watching [videos](#) of the scene, I [noted](#) the core disagreement between the professor and the undergraduates. Christakis believed that he had an obligation to listen to the views of the students, to reflect upon them, and to respond that he was persuaded or articulate why he maintained a different view. In short, he believed that one respects students by engaging them in earnest dialogue.

Many students believed that his responsibility was to hear their demands for an apology and to issue it. They saw anything short of a declaration of wrongdoing as unacceptable. In their view, one respected students by validating their hurt feelings.

Their perspective was informed by the idea that their residential college is akin to a home. At Yale, residential colleges have what was then called a "master"—a professor who lives on site and is responsible for its academic, intellectual, and social life. "Masters work with students to shape each residential college community," Yale stated, "bringing their own distinct social, cultural, and intellectual influences to the colleges." The approach is far costlier than what's on offer at commuter schools, but aims to create a richer intellectual environment where undergrads can learn from faculty and one another even outside the classroom.

"In your position as master," one student said, "it is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students who live in Silliman. You have not done that. By sending out that email, that goes against your position as master. Do you understand that?!"

"No," Christakis said, "I don't agree with that."

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As he saw it, there was no contradiction between creating a safe residence for Silliman students and challenging them intellectually, [a view Yale itself officially shares](#) (though what its representatives convey to prospective students is opaque to outsiders).

Professor Alan Jacobs of Baylor University published [one of the more insightful posts](#) on this aspect of the controversy, observing that any Yale student seeking an environment akin to a home is bound to be disappointed, because their residential colleges are, by design, places where “people from all over the world, from a wide range of social backgrounds, and with a wide range of interests and abilities, come to live together *temporarily*, for about 30 weeks a year, before moving on to their careers. It is an essentially public space,” he added, “though with controls on ingress and egress to prevent chaos and foster friendship and fellowship.”

Homes are typically places where parents instill their own values in kids whose formative experiences they shape, or where domestic partners who bonded over shared values cohabit. Insofar as Yale includes students from diverse homes, it will be unlike an actual home, and should acknowledge that reality to all of its students. Learning to live away from home by tolerating difference is part of campus life.

In that October confrontation, the student demanding a comfortable home exploded when Christakis articulated an educator’s understanding of his role. “Then why the fuck did you accept the position?!” she screamed. “Who the fuck hired you?! You should step down! If that is what you think about being a master you should step down! It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It’s about creating a home here. You are not doing that!”

The student concluded with a hateful statement: “You should not sleep at night! You are disgusting!” It was, by all accounts, an out-of-character outburst from an intelligent, normally thoughtful person in a moment of high emotion, but when video of her tirade was posted online, she was mercilessly harassed by trolls, some of whom used racial epithets and threatened to kill her. The Christakis, who defended that student, were subject to anonymous abuse and online threats, as well.

The ire that student activists directed at the couple is inseparable from the larger protest movement that roiled American campuses last fall. Many black students at Yale felt that the institution has failed to create an inclusive environment on campus, citing grievances as varied as the presence of residential college named for John C. Calhoun, who advocated for slavery in Congress, and the allegation that Yale security guards disproportionately forced students of color to show their IDs on campus.

The vast majority of grievances had nothing to do with Nicholas or Erika Christakis. Many were far more persuasive than any critiques aimed at the couple. Nor does their resignation do anything to address those grievances. Some activists nevertheless cast the couple as symbols of what was wrong with Yale, an injustice noted by a group of faculty members who came to their defense. “In the case of the Christakis, their work has been more directly oriented toward the social justice than the work of many other members of the Yale faculty,” they wrote. “For example, Nicholas Christakis worked for many years as a hospice doctor, making house visits to underserved populations in Chicago. Progressive values and social justice are not advanced by scapegoating those who share those values.”

With regard to Erika Christakis’s email, the faculty members declared themselves “deeply troubled that this modest attempt to ask people to consider the issue of self-monitoring vs. bureaucratic supervision has been misinterpreted, and in some cases recklessly distorted, as support for racist speech; and hence as justification for demanding the resignation of our colleagues from their posts at Silliman.”

But relatively few humanities professors signed that letter of support.

And when drafting the letter, the physics professor Douglas Stone found himself [warned by faculty colleagues](#) that he was putting himself at risk of being protested.

At Yale, I encountered students and faculty members who supported the Christakis but refused to say so on the record, and others who criticized them, but only anonymously. On both sides, people with perfectly mainstream opinions shared them with a journalist but declined to put their name behind them due to a campus climate where anyone could conceivably be the next object of ire and public shaming. Insufficient tolerance for disagreement is undermining campus discourse.

Off campus, many pundits published misrepresentations of Christakis’s email in the press. Without extraordinary support from colleagues or a change of heart among activists, some of whom vilified the couple out of solidarity rather than conviction, staying in residential life—which they could have chosen to do—would have assured ongoing conflict, further efforts to force their resignation, and more distractions from their scholarship. “At Silliman College’s graduation ceremony,” the *Yale Daily News* [reported](#), “some students refused to accept their diplomas from Nicholas Christakis.” Why put yourself through treatment like that?

On the other hand, their resignations all but assure that others at Yale will regard surviving a speech controversy as less viable and curtail their intellectual engagement.

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The statement put out by the couple characteristically declined to criticize anyone at the institution. “Erika and I have devoted our professional lives to advocating for all young people. We have great respect for every member of our community, friend and critic alike,” Nicholas Christakis wrote. “We remain hopeful that students at Yale can express themselves and engage complex ideas within an intellectually plural community. But we feel it is time to return full-time to our respective fields.”

They declined to comment further.

When Yale’s history is written, they should be regarded as collateral damage harmed by people who abstracted away their humanity. Yale activists felt failed by their institution and took out their frustration on two undeserving scapegoats who had only recently arrived there. Students who profess a belief in the importance of feeling safe at home marched on their house, scrawled angry messages in chalk beneath their bedroom window, hurled shouted insults and epithets, called for their jobs, and refused to shake their hands even months later, all over one email. And the couple’s ultimate resignation does nothing to improve campus climate.

What a waste.

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