

LEGACY

Halloween 2015 unmasked festering tensions over race

An email and a Facebook post lit a fuse for protests and conversations about racism at Yale — a striking moment in the broader stories of Yale, student activism and American movements for racial justice.

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In recent months, universities have become central to President Donald Trump's attack on race-conscious culture and diversity initiatives. His administration has pulled funding from universities when they refused to shutter diversity, equity and inclusion programs and has terminated "equity-related" grants or contracts for thousands of researchers, including more than 50 at Yale.

Today's colleges and universities are navigating how to speak publicly about racial inclusivity on campus, but 10 years ago this week, Yale students propelled that discourse into the fore.

Days before Halloween in 2015, Yale's Intercultural Affairs Committee circulated a message to the student body cautioning against wearing culturally insensitive costumes. On Oct. 30, 2015, Associate Master of Silliman College Erika Christakis wrote an email to Silliman students disputing the directive, criticizing the administrators' "exercise of implied control over college students." Christakis wrote that her husband, Silliman Master Nicholas Christakis, agreed.

Soon after, hundreds of students rallied against the associate master's memo, circulating a petition calling for the Christakis' removal from their posts.

The next day, Halloween, a student claimed on Facebook that she had been denied entry to a party at the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity, now known as LEO, on the grounds that the party was for "white girls only." A Yale investigation later found two credible accounts that SAE members used the phrase, but did not find evidence of a systematically racist entrance policy.

Students seized on the two events as indicators of a much wider crisis, fueling a viral confrontation with the then-Silliman Master Nicholas Christakis, weeks of demonstrations and a student-led campaign to make Yale more inclusive for students of color.

For Brea Baker '16, a student organizer during the 2015 demonstrations, the concerns about racism on campus were not the only concerns she had with University positions. Baker explained that she had known of instances of violence against Black students, including when a Yale Police Department officer held a student at gunpoint in January of that year.

She was surprised that Erika Christakis' email sparked the uproar given other pressing issues.

"There was a lot to be mad about to me. Hoarding resources, Yale endowment being invested in private prisons and fossil fuels," Baker said in a recent phone interview. "So it was like, 'Oh, that's interesting that it was this email and party that did it, that was the catalyst?'"

Since Halloween in 2015 and the ensuing weeks of student advocacy, residential college "masters" became "heads of college." Calhoun College — named after John C. Calhoun, a leading champion of American slavery and 1804 Yale graduate — was

renamed Grace Hopper College. In the path to those changes, Yale students framed their demands within a much longer timeline of concerns about race on campus. Their critics, meanwhile, alleged they overreacted.

A faculty letter of support for the Christakis denied that Erika Christakis' email constituted "support for racist expressions." The letter said that students' reaction, particularly their confrontation of Nicholas Christakis in the Silliman College courtyard, challenged the Christakis' right to free expression.

An editorial published on Nov. 9, 2015 in the Wall Street Journal, however, labeled Yale student protesters "Robespierres" and suggested someone with a Yale degree could not be marginalized in America. Readers from across the country echoed the sentiment in a series of letters published in the Journal a week later.

"Many Yale students of color walk around this campus searching for some sort of injustice that they can complain about, taking attention, time and funds away from other more or equally important issues, and reveling in the sense of power they gain from these events," Ali Stephens-Pickeral '16 wrote in one of the letters.

According to students involved in the protests, the faculty who supported them, historians and observers, students' concerns about inclusion and racism were not isolated to the events that took place around Halloween 2015 — nor were they focused only on Yale's campus.

The protests were concurrent with other high-profile campus movements for racial justice and the early years of the Black Lives Matter movement. On the University of Missouri's campus, students successfully demanded the resignation of the university president and chancellor after alleging they had not sufficiently responded to repeated instances of racism on campus. The protests at Mizzou were also driven by the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. the previous year.

"As someone who cares about justice in a broad sense, not just where I happened to be, hearing about other people's experiences was so helpful," Abby Johnson '15, another student activist, said about organizers at other universities in a recent phone interview. "It also underscored the point that these issues are pervasive and not just not just about Yale, or another institution, but these are systemic problems across higher education."

In a November 2015 opinion article for the New York Times, Christopher Lebron, then a professor of African American studies and philosophy at Yale, resisted the narrative that students at Yale were overreacting to a series of small-scale, insignificant events.

"These and similar events are the catalyst for a revelation — that the rage and sadness these students inherited have been there for years, waiting to make themselves known," he wrote.

Another opinion article in the New York Times by Eve Fairbanks '05, published in December, compared

American student protests to a contemporaneous movement at South African universities to take down statues that honored the country's colonial history and to make academic offerings more reflective of Black history and literature.

A popular critique of American student protests, Fairbanks noted, was that their demands reflected a "cultural obsession with affirmation." Instead, she argued, the global movement reflected an effort to reclaim spaces they should have more say in.

Angus Johnston, a historian of student activism and professor at the Hostos Community College at the City University of New York, believes said that the students have been "vindicated" in their response to Christakis' email.

"What these protesters understood, I think a lot of them, was that the kind of social environment that you create, the kind of environment that you countenance, is going to shape the way that society looks, that it is okay to say that certain kinds of speech are beyond the pale," Johnston said in a Zoom interview. "And I think that one of the things that a lot of critics of student protest in the era that we're talking about really got wrong is claiming that strong, aggressive rejection of hateful speech was the same as censorship."

Some Yale students at the time saw their experiences of racism on campus as representative of a wider national and international reality, as well as a pervasive problem on campus that had long gone unaddressed.

"In that moment, Yalies went from being in solidarity with other people to being like, 'Hey, wait, we've got our own stuff to work out, too, and let's figure this out together,'" Baker said.

In a November 2015 issue of DOWN Magazine — a publication led by students of color and founded earlier that year in response to separate instances of on-campus racism — Daad Sharfi '17 wrote that racism was "embedded in this institution and its history."

"It's going to be a long haul and I probably won't be around to see the big picture realized to its fullest but to keep fighting this long, exhausting fight we need to commit to the revolution of loving ourselves," Sharfi wrote.

At Yale, some changes did take effect. The University administration quickly committed to spending \$50 million to expand faculty diversity, allotted more budget funding to Yale's cultural centers, expanded course offerings on ethnicity and race and instituted multicultural training for mental health counselors, among other actions.

Today, some commentators and professors maintain that the protests — and the University's quick response — represented a shift in how students perceived their campuses' role in responding to their needs, and a longer-term leftward movement among student activists.

"This kind of wokeness continued, and it kind of came to a head with the big protests, obviously not just here at Yale, but

over the country, over the Gaza war," Steven Smith, a professor of political science and former master of Branford College, said in a phone interview.

In a December 2023 article, Len Gutkin GRD '14 argued that division on campuses in response to Israel's war in Gaza should be understood within the context of the 2015 protests, writing, "a renascent brand of identitarian student activism began to assume moral authority on campus, commanding administrative fealty and inspiring conservative loathing in equal measure."

recruit more Black and brown students to the university," Trachtenberg said of Mizzou's protests in a phone interview. "Well, some of the ways that universities used to do that have now been declared illegal by the Supreme Court of the United States. That's not something over which the President of Yale or the University of Missouri has any real influence."

Those changes amount to a "sea change in higher education," Trachtenberg said.

Johnston contends that critics of the students — especially those who claimed their reactions disrupted

“THESE ISSUES ARE PERVASIVE AND NOT JUST NOT JUST ABOUT YALE, OR ANOTHER INSTITUTION, BUT THESE ARE SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS ACROSS HIGHER EDUCATION.”

"We may as well start with the Yale Halloween Costume Controversy, which in retrospect appears a compact fable containing all or almost all of the elements of our disorienting campus present," Gutkin wrote.

According to Ben Trachtenberg, a professor at the University of Missouri School of Law, it is difficult to trace the long-term impacts of students' advocacy for racial justice as a result of the "confounding factors" that emerged after Donald Trump's first presidential election a year after the 2015 events, especially the Supreme Court's dismantling of affirmative action.

Since Trump took office for the second time in January, hundreds of universities have reworked or entirely eliminated their diversity, equity and inclusion programs to avoid federal funding cuts.

"One of the things that the students really wanted was a very robust effort to

campus free speech — were wrong, and that they took the side of the "people who put us in this position."

"The argument that the protesters, like the ones at Yale, were making was that racism is a real serious problem in our society and that we need to find ways as a society, combat it, not just through the premise that says that, you know, 'bad ideas must be countered by good ideas and it'll work itself out,'" Johnston said.

The "March of Resilience" through Yale's campus, which drew over a thousand student protesters, was on Nov. 9, 2015.

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