

SPEECH

Silliman email cued question: What's a master for?

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STAFF REPORTERS

On a February afternoon in 2015, the Silliman dining hall broke into “whooping applause” after its newly appointed master, Nicholas Christakis '84, announced to students that his family's two dogs would be available for sleepovers.

Just nine months later, over a hundred furious students surrounded Christakis in the Silliman courtyard. One demanded of him: “Who the fuck hired you?”

Two months after the first class of first-year Sillimanders under the Christakis arrived on campus, Associate Master Erika Christakis sent students an email under the subject line “Dressing Yourself.” In it, she questioned administrators' authority to dictate the Halloween costumes students wore, arguing that students should not be afraid to be “inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive” in the way they dress.

“I am not trying to be provocative,” Christakis wrote in the email. Whatever her intentions were, her interjection “led to a campus firestorm,” and she and her family became “tinder for a mass emotional conflagration,” she wrote in a 2016 Washington Post op-ed.

The email generated debates across campus and in the years since about the role of master, a title replaced the next year by “head of college” as part of the racial reckoning that the email helped set off.

Paul McKinley, a Yale College senior associate dean and a two-time former dean of Saybrook College, told the News that masters offer “idiosyncrasies” to residential college life.

For the Christakis, advocacy for free expression was a priority that came to define their brief tenure in Silliman.

Heads should have “different visions” for their role, said Stephen Davis GRD '98, a former master and then head of Pierson College who personally dropped the title “master” over the summer of 2015 because its historical and racial connotations had made him uncomfortable.

However, if a head chooses to “focus in on one particular issue, and the consequence is that everything else kind of gets out of kilter,” Davis said, that inhibits their “ability to do what they want to do in the role.”

‘Our discourse about the exercise of free speech’

In an email announcing his appointment, University President Peter Salovey and Yale College Dean Jonathan Holloway lauded Nicholas Christakis for his contributions to sociology and public health.

Christakis was ranked among Time Magazine's 100 most influential people of 2009 and Foreign Policy magazine's top global thinkers in 2009 and 2010. A 2010 TED talk in which he discusses “the hidden influence of social networks” has amassed over two million plays on the TED website. Both Christakis were also

advocates for unfettered free expression, including in their roles as co-masters of Harvard's Pforzheimer House from 2009 to 2013.

In a 2012 op-ed in Time magazine, the couple criticized Harvard's response to a racist and antisemitic satirical flyer, accusing administrators of running a “free-speech surveillance state” that “infantilizes students” and permits them to “restrict the speech of others so that they can avoid their unpleasant feelings.”

In a personal blog post written in 2013 entitled “Use Your Words,” Erika Christakis recounted the frustration she felt with some Harvard students' refusal to engage with “insensitive” and “oafish” remarks made by a peer expressing resentment for students on financial aid.

The blog post bears striking resemblances to the email she sent to Silliman students on Halloween weekend two and a half years later, in response to an email sent to all undergraduates by Yale's Intercultural Affairs Council that asked them to be “thoughtful” when choosing Halloween costumes in order to avoid engaging in “cultural appropriation.”

“A healthy democracy depends on the free exchange of speech,” Erika Christakis wrote in the email, which cited her background in education. “Speaking as a child development specialist, I think there might be something missing in our discourse about the exercise of free speech.”

Nicholas and Erika Christakis declined to comment for this article.

Leading a residential college

In interviews, both Davis and Traugott Lawler, the master of Ezra Stiles from 1986 to 1995, called the role of master or head the best jobs they had held. They emphasized how rewarding it was to get to know undergraduates and eat in the dining halls daily, chatting with students.

The specifics of what the job actually entails are not precisely defined — much of it is up to heads themselves.

When the Christakis stepped into Silliman College leadership in July 2015, the Yale College website described the role of master as responsible for “the physical well being and safety of students in the residential college, as well as for fostering and shaping the social, cultural, and educational life and character of the college.”

In a “Welcome to Silliman!” pamphlet addressed to the class of 2019, however, Nicholas Christakis

centered his own responsibilities to the college around the setting of an “intellectual, social, and ethical tone.”

Lawler told the News he “wasn't ever told that I was responsible for looking to the intellectual and moral development of my students.”

If a head of college enters the role with an eye to the “ethical” development of students, their own moral values may influence their leadership.

“Heads can have strong opinions and commitments,” Davis told the News. However, he said, “if those strong commitments” do not allow heads to be present with students and prioritize the “coherent, integral valuing of students, then that inhibits their ability to do the work fully.”

“Heads of College have a central role in their residential college communities, serving as compass and chief executive officer,” the description on the Yale College website currently reads, using language updated last year. “Each college has its ethos, traditions, and activities, which Heads support and enhance.”

Amy Hungerford, who was Morse master from 2012 to 2014, emphasized that a professor in the role of master should “model what it means to be passionate.”

“You don't change yourself in order to appear neutral,” she said.

The fallout from ‘Dressing Yourself’

The same weekend Erika Christakis sent her email, allegations of a “white girls only” fraternity party surfaced. The two incidents combined to produce a student uproar about racism on campus, with students confronting administrators to demand a variety of changes. Within a week, campus activists led a massive “March of Resilience.”

“This period of time for me was incredibly formative,” Davis said. “It clarified my moral and ethical vision for what leadership needed to look like at the University.”

He said he started to think about “when I needed to speak and when I needed to not speak.”

Brea Baker '16, who helped organize the 2015 protests, said that the Christakis email was “divisive” and defended “free speech for one group, I think, at the expense of mental health and inclusion for other groups.”

Nicholas Christakis told the News a week after his wife sent the email that she had written it because she

believed that in doing so, she was “serving the intellectual and moral needs of students.”

He said he did not think that generating such intellectual discourse was inconsistent with addressing student needs.

Davis — who chaired the Council of Masters beginning in July 2015 — stressed that masters, and now heads of colleges, must reconcile the values of free speech and collective empathy among students.

“How do you create space for students to disagree and to be themselves?” Davis asked in a recent interview with the News. “That culture of care is a different value metric than, say, freedom of speech, and it has to be navigated and negotiated. I think if you value, say, something like freedom of speech to the detriment of, say, a culture of care, you're missing something.”

In mid-November 2015, Nicholas Christakis wrote an “open letter to the Silliman community,” entitled “The Idea of Positive Intent.”

In the letter, Christakis wrote: “Finally, in the spirit of positive intent, I quite understand that the movement on campus has a laudable objective. It seeks better communication among groups; it seeks to redress past wrongs; and it seeks to have its own, powerful, voice. The last item in particular, if you re-read Erika's email, was a point she herself was making!”

The Christakis resigned from their positions in Silliman College leadership at the end of May of the next year, less than seven months after Erika sent out the email with the subject line “Dressing Yourself.”

Less than a month after the Christakis stepped down from their roles at Silliman, Salovey announced that psychology professor Laurie Santos would succeed Nicholas Christakis as head of Silliman College. Santos had been teaching at Yale for 13 years, and her classes were popular — a record-breaking 584 students took her spring 2015 iteration of “Sex, Evolution and Human Nature.”

Nicholas Christakis runs the Human Nature Lab as part of the Yale Institute for Network Science. He was appointed Sterling professor of social and natural science in 2018.

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Illustration by Sebastian Woods

Christakis' defenders see freer campus discourse

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In response to outrage sparked by an email sent by then-Silliman Associate Master Erika Christakis to Silliman College students in 2015, 49 faculty members signed a letter of support for the “right of Erika and Nicholas Christakis to free speech and freedom of intellectual expression.”

“A crucial component of free expression is the possibility of open and civil discussions, without vilifying those who disagree with one's own viewpoint,” the letter read.

Ten years later, five faculty members who signed the letter recently described the Yale community as more receptive to free speech now than in 2015. cq

“I believe that the Yale community is more open to free speech and free expression than it was a decade ago,” Julia Adams, who between 2014 and 2024 was the master of Calhoun College and then head of renamed Grace Hopper College, wrote in an email to the News. “Nicholas and Erika Christakis' courageous defense of those principles helped make that possible, in my view.”

“The University itself has since underlined its support of the Woodward Report, which I think is great. I also did so, explicitly, as then-head of college, especially to facilitate the community discussion and debate around the name change from Calhoun to Grace Hopper College,” Adams, a co-chair of President Maurie McInnis' Committee on Trust in Higher Education, added.

The Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale, known as the Woodward Report and adopted by the University in 1975, provides principles to foster open discourse on campus.

On Oct. 30, 2015, Erika Christakis,

the wife of Silliman's then-Master Nicholas Christakis, sent an email to the Silliman community questioning the implications of the Intercultural Affairs Committee's recently proposed guidelines about culturally insensitive costumes.

Erika Christakis declined via email to comment on the 2015 controversy, pointing the News to a 2016 opinion piece she published in The Washington Post. At the time, she wrote that her attempt to “generate a reflective conversation among students” was met by what she said many outside observers saw as “a baffling overreaction.”

Referencing the institutional response to the controversy, Erika Christakis added that “by affirming only the narrow right to air my views, rather than helping the community to grapple with its intense response, an unfortunate message was made plain: Certain ideas are too dangerous to be heard at Yale.”

Nicholas Christakis, in a 2019 interview, classified the 2015 controversy as a “challenging period” in his life. Citing a Nov. 5, 2015, confrontation during which he stood and interacted with students for just over two hours in the Silliman courtyard, Nicholas Christakis said that “many of the students were swept up in a kind of mob fervor” and “should have known better.”

On Oct. 30, 2024 — nine years to the day Erika Christakis emailed Silliman students about the Halloween costume guidance — McInnis accepted a report by the Committee on Institutional Voice that implored University leaders to refrain from issuing “statements concerning matters of public, social, or political significance, except in rare cases.”

McInnis' adoption of the institutional voice report contributed to Yale's 97-spot increase this year

in a “College Free Speech Ranking” — based on student surveys, campus policies and speech-related controversies aggregated by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, or FIRE — to 58th of 275 universities surveyed nationwide.

“FIRE believes institutional neutrality is a cornerstone of a truly free and open campus,” Laura Beltz, the FIRE director of policy reform, wrote in an email to the News.

FIRE's latest report also said Yale students still reported a “mixed atmosphere” on campus with regard to freedom of expression, with 33 percent of its survey's respondents reporting that they self-censor on a monthly basis.

FIRE CEO Greg Lukianoff was present on campus on Nov. 5, 2015, and filmed videos of the confrontation between Nicholas Christakis and students in the Silliman courtyard. Lukianoff was already scheduled to appear at Silliman for a college tea with Christakis about campus free speech and attended a panel on freedom of speech hosted by the Buckley Institute.

Lukianoff has not returned to Yale since then, according to FIRE spokesperson Alex Griswold.

Jim Sleeper '69, a former political science lecturer who did not sign the 2015 letter backing the Christakis and who left Yale in 2020, said in an interview that the couple had presented themselves as “being martyred, sacrificed on the altar of politically correct, crazed student radicals.”

“I think that the Christakis presented themselves — with the help of this guy, Greg Lukianoff of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education — as apostles of free speech, defenders of free speech,” Sleeper said, using FIRE's pre-2022 name.

Faculty members who signed the 2015 letter of support for the Christakis expressed opposition to the conduct of certain students during the November confrontation at Silliman.

“I saw these videos, and I thought, this is kind of abusive surrounding somebody in that way,” A. Douglas Stone, professor of applied physics and physics, said in a phone interview.

Stone co-authored the November 2015 open letter defending the Christakis with two other faculty members who, due to holding administrative positions at the time, chose not to be publicly identified. Stone said he chose to author the letter after watching videos of the confrontation.

“He was trying to communicate with the students and open a dialogue, and he was getting very aggressive pushback from them,” Paul Forscher, a professor emeritus of molecular, cellular and developmental biology and signatory of the letter, said of Christakis in an interview.

Debates about free expression on campus have been hotly contested in recent years and have been shaped this year by President Donald Trump's return to the White House.

Forscher said the Trump administration's aggressive policies toward universities — which have been aimed at fostering ideological diversity; curbing diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives; and curbing antisemitism — have affected the climate of free speech.

In an April opinion piece in the News, two faculty members voiced concerns about a “double standard” in disciplinary action taken against pro-Palestinian student protestors. The faculty members alleged that university policies were being used against certain groups for the content of their speech.

Yale revoked Yalies4Palestine's status as a registered student group in April 2025, following a protest on Beinecke Plaza for which the group allegedly took credit through public social media posts.

“These conversations about how we balance a climate of inclusion and mutual respect with an absolute regard for the freedom to differ publicly are now unfolding in a radically altered and urgent context of state repression,” Catherine Nicholson, a co-author of the opinion piece and professor of English, wrote in an email to the News.

“Any internal efforts to facilitate free speech and discourse on campus that do not name, reckon with, and actively resist that threat are worse than ineffective; they are corrosive of our mission,” Nicholson added.

The April disciplinary action against Yalies4Palestine also prompted 1,020 faculty members to sign a letter urging leaders to “defend the rights to free speech on campus recognized in the Woodward Report,” including through the support of “community members at risk of government infringement on this right.”

The previous year, in February 2024, faculty members formed a faculty group, Faculty for Yale, that “confirm Yale's commitment to robust free expression” and “insist on the primacy of teaching, learning, and research as distinct from advocacy and activism.”

As of Oct. 21 2025, Faculty for Yale has 162 signatories, including Nicholas Christakis and 18 of the professors who signed the 2015 letter backing him and his wife.

Jerry Gao contributed reporting.

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