

ADMINISTRATION

Demands for change marked test in Salovey's tenure

In 2015, President Peter Salovey and Yale College Dean Jonathan Holloway faced passionate calls to make Yale more inclusive for students of color. Some students and professors think they should have acted faster.

BY JAEHA JANG
STAFF REPORTER

In his opening address to first years in 2015, former University President Peter Salovey implored the Yale College class of 2019 to engage in “difficult conversations” about Yale’s “complicated and sometimes surprising” ties to the past, including the naming of Calhoun College after the pro-slavery advocate and Yale College alumnus John C. Calhoun.

“I cherish Yale’s traditions and her history, and I do not believe we should undo them motivated solely by events or emotions of the moment,” Salovey said, referring to the debate about whether to rename Calhoun College. “Good people — moral and principled people — can and will disagree about it.”

Less than three months later, thousands of Yalies confronted the University’s past and present — perhaps not in the way Salovey had imagined in August. Campus events — including a series of emails about cultural sensitivity, allegations of racism at a Halloween party and subsequent protests — rapidly shaped University-wide discourse, and emotions ran high.

In the weeks following Oct. 31, 2015, students demanded a range of reforms for racial equity, spanning from the renaming of Calhoun to increased access to mental health services. University administrators performed a careful balancing act between student calls for change and administrative caution, meeting some demands while leaving others unanswered.

“There is a tendency sometimes for administrations to view student protests as a bother or an annoyance or an obstacle to work around,” Stephen Davis GRD ’98, who served as Pierson’s master and then head of college between 2013 and 2023, said in a phone interview with the News. “There were times when Yale struggled to figure out how best to engage with the students and to recognize what they were doing as a form of engagement.”

Salovey and then Dean of Yale College Jonathan Holloway GRD ’95 declined to comment for this article, citing personal policies against commenting on past issues and positions.

A week of administrative silence, compromised demands

Two years into his presidency, Salovey was known for his accessible style, having launched “Notes from Woodbridge Hall,” a series of biweekly emails to the University community, and made a habit of performing at Toad’s with his band, the Professors of Bluegrass.

It took him one week to directly respond to two incidents on Oct. 30, 2015 — too long, according to four students and faculty.

On the morning of Friday, Oct. 30, Silliman College Associate Master Erika Christakis sent an email to Silliman students criticizing a message from the Intercultural Affairs Committee earlier that week, which cautioned students against cultural appropriation during Halloween. Christakis’s email promptly drew widespread criticism, including a letter signed by more than 740 people who called it “offensive” and accused it of invalidating minority voices.

That night, the fraternity Sigma Alpha Epsilon — a chapter that later disaffiliated from the national organization and was renamed LEO — hosted a Halloween party that became the subject of allegations of racial discrimination. A student claimed in a Facebook post the following day that women of color were turned away on the basis that the party was for “white girls only.”

On Nov. 3, Salovey and then University Provost Benjamin Polak GRD ’01 announced the launch of a \$50 million initiative to expand faculty diversity. This statement did not address Christakis’s email or the allegations of racism at SAE, though two weeks later, Salovey

characterized this initiative as part of a wave of policy changes prompted by “the expressions of those who do not feel fully included at Yale.”

Polak did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

On Nov. 4, some students who gathered at a race-related discussion forum at the Afro-American Cultural Center pointed out the administration’s silence on Christakis’s email and the allegations of racism at the SAE party. While more than 350 individuals, including Christakis, attended the forum, neither Salovey nor Holloway was present, the News reported at the time.

In the afternoon of Nov. 5, more than 200 protesters who had gathered on Cross Campus for a chalking event surrounded and confronted Holloway.

One year into his deanship, the African American studies professor had built a reputation for transparency and concern for student life, becoming the first Yale College dean in recent memory to attend a Yale College Council meeting. Holloway, a former master of Calhoun College, was Yale’s first Black dean.

“It is painful for me — as someone who has a vested interest in supporting you — to hear what you have just told me, but I am glad you did,” Holloway said, addressing the students in a speech on the Women’s Table after listening to them for three hours. “I’m here for you. I do have your back. Please know that I have heard your stories and I’ll leave here changed.”

That evening, Salovey, Holloway and other members of the administration met with about 50 minority students in the Corporation Room of Woodbridge Hall to listen to student grievances. At the meeting, students still demanded an official administrative response to the previous week’s controversies, the News reported at the time.

Salovey finally broke his public silence on the morning of Nov. 6, one week after Christakis’s email and the SAE party that drew allegations of racism. In an email addressed to the Yale community, Salovey acknowledged the “great distress” of minority students and promised to announce policy changes before Thanksgiving.

On Nov. 17, Salovey outlined a four-part plan to improve diversity and inclusion at Yale, through new initiatives in academics, student support, institutional structures and representation.

“In my thirty-five years on this campus, I have never been as simultaneously moved, challenged, and encouraged by our community—and all the promise it embodies—as in the past two weeks,” Salovey wrote.

On the same day, he and Holloway emailed Silliman College to reaffirm the Christakis’ leadership positions and call “for a spirit of generosity and a willingness to assume the best in others.” One of the core demands of student activists had been the immediate removal of the Christakis from their leadership positions.

‘Feelings of almost abandonment’

Karleh Wilson ’16 felt that the administration’s statements in 2015 were not “appropriate or rapid enough.” She felt that administrators were overly worried about alumni input and student activism “messing up Yale’s reputation.”

“They were putting out statements, but I didn’t actually feel like they heard me, saw me, and cared about myself and other students that were going through similar things,” Wilson said in a phone interview with the News. “It became clear that they didn’t realize how much we were dealing with as African American students or just minorities in general.”

Brea Baker ’16 said she felt “feelings of almost abandonment” from Salovey and Holloway’s responses to the student body’s advocacy. Administrators had been charged with student well-being,

she said, but she felt they cared more about alumni and the press.

Davis said he believes administrators should have conveyed more “emotional honesty” in public communications in the midst of student advocacy.

“It remains a fact that I think that the students felt supported by the people who were present supporting them, but there were moments where they weren’t sure that they were being heard,” Davis said. “So I think that collectively is a kind of labor that universities can do better, should do better.”

Davis added that Holloway’s Nov. 5 appearance on Cross Campus, where he listened to students for three hours, exemplified the administration’s active presence. As the face of the administration to undergraduates, Holloway honored the students’ grievances despite being their target, Davis said.

According to Davis, the administration was working to “corral things piece by piece” as it announced targeted policy changes throughout the year.

The administration’s \$50 million commitment to expand faculty diversity, he said, was based on existing demands from faculty and “happened to dovetail in part” with student advocacy. Similarly, increased financial aid was an issue students had been advocating for before 2015.

“What made that time so vibrant and also complicated was, there was a lot going on,” he said. “There were a lot of conversations being had, some of which had been happening for a time earlier, and during that period, some conversations gave renewed energy or raised new issues, new dimensions.”

Engagement or capitulation?

According to Davis, a defining difference between the roles of heads of college — called “masters” in 2015 — and the University administration is the extent of presence among students. While heads of college build trust through constant presence among students and staff, the University is a “huge entity” that is not “set up like that,” he said.

While a negative perception of student protests is not unique to 2015 or to Yale, Davis said, he thinks student protests are a mode of engagement that Yale should be “encouraging, actually, as part of the wider aspects of a university education and experience.”

Steven Smith, who served as the master of Branford College from 1996 to 2011, believes the

administration went too far in engaging with students’ demands in 2015. The administration should have considered the merit and validity of student demands more carefully, he said.

According to Smith, the \$50 million commitment to faculty diversity that the University announced four days after

in 2015, and these works have been “meaningful” for Black students and alumni and for the “health of the University,” he said.

In May 2016, Salovey announced that the title of “master” would change to “head of college,” that the two new residential colleges being built would be named after Benjamin Franklin and Anna

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Christakis’s email represented a “moment of capitulation” to students and a sign that “the University was in the grip of wokeness.”

“It sounds like an attempt to me just to buy the goodwill of this mob,” he said in a phone interview with the News. “Can you imagine the good that that 50 million dollars could be put to for student life and tuition? To me, it sounds like it was just a gesture of fear and sort of defensiveness. ‘Oh, yes, we’ll give you 50 million dollars.’ It’s a staggering sum of money.”

Smith added that while every student has the freedom to voice discontent, he thinks the advocacy represented only a loud group of students, not the entire student body.

Davis said he “definitely” thinks the advocacy of 2015 informed the rest of Salovey’s presidency. Many self-reflective projects, including institutional research into Yale’s relationship with slavery, would not have happened without the conversations sparked

Pauli Murray LAW ’65 and that Calhoun College would not be renamed. Calhoun was ultimately renamed to Grace Hopper College in February 2017.

In his August 2016 opening address, Salovey still emphasized the value of critical thinking, but he qualified how to approach it in “increasingly polarized and fractious times.”

“We sometimes find that anger, fear, or disgust can blind us to the complexity of the world and the responsibility to seek deeper understandings of important issues,” he said. Yale, he added, is “where we prize exceptional diversity of views alongside the greatest possible freedom of expression.”

Salovey plans to return to teaching next school year.

Adele Haeg and Olivia Woo contributed reporting.

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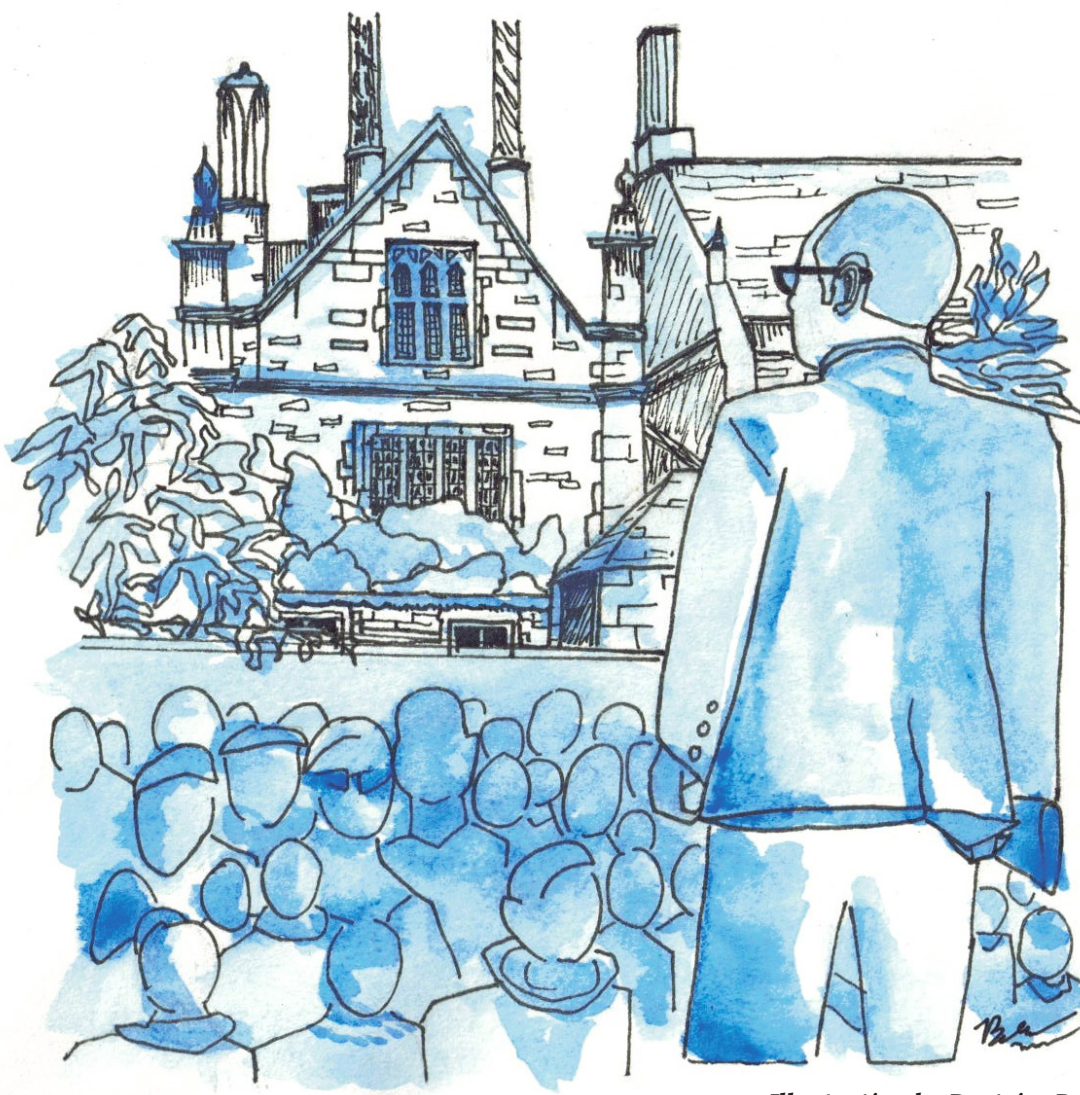


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