POLITICS

The New Intolerance of Student Activism

A fight over Halloween costumes at Yale has devolved into an effort to censor dissenting views.

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Professor Nicholas Christakis lives at Yale, where he presides over one of its undergraduate colleges. His wife Erika, a lecturer in early childhood education, shares that duty. They reside among students and are responsible for shaping residential life. And before Halloween, some students complained to them that Yale administrators were offering

heavy-handed advice on what Halloween costumes to avoid.

Erika Christakis reflected on the frustrations of the students, drew on her scholarship and career experience, and composed an email inviting the community to think about the controversy through an intellectual lens that few if any had considered. Her message was a model of relevant, thoughtful, civil engagement.

For her trouble, a faction of students are now trying to get the couple removed from their residential positions, which is to say, censured and ousted from their home on campus. Hundreds of Yale students are attacking them, some with hateful insults, shouted epithets, and a campaign of public shaming. In doing so, they have shown an illiberal streak that flows from flaws in their well-intentioned ideology.

Those who purport to speak for marginalized students at elite colleges sometimes expose serious shortcomings in the way that their black, brown, or Asian classmates are treated, and would expose flaws in the way that religious students and ideological conservatives are treated too if they cared to speak up for those groups. I've known many Californians who found it hard to adjust to life in the Ivy League, where a faction of highly privileged kids acculturated at elite prep schools still set the tone of a decidedly East Coast culture. All else being equal, outsiders who also feel like racial or ethnic "others" typically walk the roughest road of all.

That may well be true at Yale.

But none of that excuses the Yale activists who've bullied these particular faculty in recent days. They're behaving more like Reddit parodies of "social-

justice warriors" than coherent activists, and I suspect they will look back on their behavior with chagrin. The purpose of writing about their missteps now is not to condemn these students. Their young lives are tremendously impressive by any reasonable measure. They are unfortunate to live in an era in which the normal mistakes of youth are unusually visible. To keep the focus where it belongs I won't be naming any of them here.

The focus belongs on the flawed ideas that they've absorbed.

Everyone invested in how the elites of tomorrow are being acculturated should understand, as best they can, how so many cognitively privileged, ordinarily kind, seemingly well-intentioned young people could lash out with such flagrant intolerance.

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What happens at Yale does not stay there.

With world-altering research to support, graduates who assume positions of extraordinary power, and a $24.9 billion endowment to marshal for better or worse, Yale administrators face huge opportunity costs as they parcel out their days. Many hours must be spent looking after undergraduates, who experience problems as serious as clinical depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, and sexual assault. Administrators also help others, who struggle with financial stress or being the first in their families to attend college.

It is therefore remarkable that no fewer than 13 administrators took scarce time to compose, circulate, and co-sign a letter advising adult students on how to dress for Halloween, a cause

that misguided campus activists mistake for a social-justice priority.

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- Readers, staffers, and others debate the campus controversies at Yale and Mizzou

"Parents who wonder why college tuition is so high and why it increases so much each year may be less than pleased to learn that their sons and daughters will have an opportunity to interact with more administrators and staffers—but not more professors," Benjamin Ginsberg observed in *Washington Monthly* back in 2011. "For many of these career managers, promoting teaching and research is less important than expanding their own administrative domains."

All over America, dispensing Halloween costume advice is now an annual ritual performed by college administrators.

Erika Christakis was questioning that practice when she composed her email, adding nuance to a conversation that some students were already having. Traditionally, she began, Halloween is both a day of subversion for young people and a time when adults exert their control over their behavior: from bygone, overblown fears about candy spiked with poison or razorblades to a more recent aversion to the sugar in candy.

"This year, we seem afraid that college students are unable to decide how to dress themselves on Halloween," she wrote. "I don't wish to trivialize genuine concerns about cultural and personal representation, and other challenges to our lived experience in a plural community. I know that many

decent people have proposed guidelines on Halloween costumes from a spirit of avoiding hurt and offense. I laud those goals, in theory, as most of us do. But in practice, I wonder if we should reflect more transparently, as a community, on the consequences of an institutional (bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students."

It's hard to imagine a more deferential way to begin voicing her alternative view. And having shown her interlocutors that she respects them and shares their ends, she explained her misgivings about the means of telling college kids what to wear on Halloween:

> I wanted to share my thoughts with you from a totally different angle, as an educator concerned with the developmental stages of

childhood and young adulthood.

As a former preschool teacher... it is hard for me to give credence to a claim that there is something objectionably "appropriative" about a blonde haired child's wanting to be Mulan for a day. Pretend play is the foundation of most cognitive tasks, and it seems to me that we want to be in the business of encouraging the exercise of imagination, not constraining it.

I suppose we could agree that there is a difference between fantasizing about an individual character vs. appropriating a culture, wholesale, the latter of which could be seen as (tacky) (offensive)(jejeune)(hurtful), take your pick. But, then, I wonder what is the statute of limitations on dreaming of dressing as Tiana the Frog Princess if you aren't a black

> girl from New Orleans? Is it okay if you are eight, but not 18? I don't know the answer to these questions; they seem unanswerable. Or at the least, they put us on slippery terrain that I, for one, prefer not to cross.
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> Which is my point.
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> I don't, actually, trust myself to foist my Halloweenish standards and motives on others. I can't defend them anymore than you could defend yours.

When I was in college, a position of this sort taken by a faculty member would likely have been regarded as a show of respect for all students and their ability to think for themselves. She added, "even if we could agree on how to avoid offense," there may be something lost if administrators try to stamp out all offense-giving behavior:

> I wonder, and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition. And the censure and prohibition come from above, not from yourselves! Are we all okay with this transfer of power? 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?

In her view, students would be better served if colleges showed more faith in their capacity to

work things out themselves, which would help them to develop cognitive skills. "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 offence are hallmarks of a free and open society," she wrote. "But—again, speaking as a child development specialist—I think there might be something missing in our discourse about ... free speech (including how we dress) on campus, and it is this: What does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgment? In other words: Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It's not mine, I know that."

That's the measured, thoughtful pre-Halloween email that caused Yale students to demand that Nicholas and Erika

Christakis resign their roles at Silliman College. That's how Nicholas Christakis came to stand in an emotionally charged crowd of Silliman students, where he attempted to respond to the fallout from the email his wife sent.

Watching footage of that meeting, a fundamental disagreement is revealed between professor and undergrads. Christakis believes that he has an obligation to listen to the views of the students, to reflect upon them, and to either respond that he is persuaded or to articulate why he has a different view. Put another way, he believes that one respects students by engaging them in earnest dialogue. But many of the students believe that his responsibility is to hear their demands for an apology and to issue it. They see anything short of a confession of wrongdoing as unacceptable. In their view,

one respects students by validating their subjective feelings.

Notice that the student position allows no room for civil disagreement.

Given this set of assumptions, perhaps it is no surprise that the students behave like bullies even as they see themselves as victims. This is most vividly illustrated in a video clip that begins with one student saying, "Walk away, he doesn't deserve to be listened to."

At Yale, every residential college has a "master"—a professor who lives in residence with their family, and is responsible for its academic,

intellectual, and social life. "Masters work with students to shape each residential college community," Yale states, "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 says, "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," he said, "I don't agree with that."

The student explodes, "Then why the fuck did you accept the

position?! 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 Yale student appears to believe that creating an intellectual space and a home are at odds with one another. But the entire model of a residential college is premised on the notion that it's worthwhile for students to reside in a campus home infused with intellectualism, even though creating it requires lavishing extraordinary resources on youngsters who are already among the world's most advantaged. It is no accident that masters are drawn from the ranks of the faculty.

The student finally declares, "You should not sleep at night! You are disgusting!" Bear in

mind that this is a student described by peers with phrases like, to cite one example, "I've never known her to be anything other than extremely kind, level-headed, and rational." But her apparent embrace of an ideology that tends toward intolerance produce a very different set of behaviors.

In the face of hateful personal attacks like that, Nicholas Christakis listened and gave restrained, civil responses. He later magnanimously tweeted, "No one, especially no students exercising right to speech, should be judged just on basis of short video clip." (He is right.) And he invited students who still disagreed with him, and with his wife, to continue the conversation at a brunch to be hosted in their campus home.

In "The Coddling of the American Mind," Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argued that too many college students engage in

"catastrophizing," which is to say, turning common events into nightmarish trials or claiming that easily bearable events are too awful to bear. After citing examples, they concluded, "smart people do, in fact, overreact to innocuous speech, make mountains out of molehills, and seek punishment for anyone whose words make anyone else feel uncomfortable."

What Yale students did next vividly illustrates that phenomenon.

According to *The Washington Post*, "several students in Silliman said they cannot bear to live in the college anymore." These are young people who live in safe, heated buildings with two Steinway grand pianos, an indoor basketball court, a courtyard with hammocks and picnic tables, a computer lab, a dance studio, a gym, a movie theater, a film-editing lab, billiard tables, an art gallery,

and four music practice rooms. But they can't bear this setting that millions of people would risk their lives to inhabit because one woman wrote an email that hurt their feelings?

Another Silliman resident declared in a campus publication, "I have had to watch my friends defend their right to this institution. This email and the subsequent reaction to it have interrupted their lives. I have friends who are not going to class, who are not doing their homework, who are losing sleep, who are skipping meals, and who are having breakdowns." One feels for these students. But if an email about Halloween costumes has them skipping class and suffering breakdowns, either they need help from mental-health professionals or they've been grievously ill-served by debilitating ideological notions they've

acquired about what ought to cause them pain.

The student next described what she thinks residential life at Yale should be. Her words: "I don't want to debate. I want to talk about my pain." In fact, students were perfectly free to talk about their pain. Some felt entitled to something more, and that is what prolonged the debate—not a faculty member who'd rather have been anywhere else.

As students saw it, their pain ought to have been the decisive factor in determining the acceptability of the Halloween email. They thought their request for an apology ought to have been sufficient to secure one. Who taught them that it is righteous to pillory faculty for failing to validate their feelings, as if disagreement is tantamount to disrespect? Their mindset is anti-diversity, anti-pluralism, and anti-tolerance, a

seeming data-point in favor of April Kelly-Woessner's provocative argument that "young people today are less politically tolerant than their parents' generation."

Hundreds of Yale students have now signed an open letter to Erika Christakis that is alarming in its own right, not least because it is so poorly reasoned. "Your email equates old traditions of using harmful stereotypes and tropes to further degrade marginalized people, to preschoolers playing make believe," the letter inaccurately summarizes. "This both trivializes the harm done by these tropes and infantilizes the student body to which the request was made." Up is down. The person saying that adult men and women should work Halloween out among themselves is accused of infantilizing them. "You fail to

distinguish the difference between cosplaying fictional characters and misrepresenting actual groups of people," the letter continues, though Erika Christakis specifically wrote in her Halloween email, "I suppose we could agree that there is a difference between fantasizing about an individual character vs. appropriating a culture, wholesale, the latter of which could be seen as (tacky) (offensive) (jejeune) (hurtful), take your pick."

Hundreds of Yalies signed on to the blatant misrepresentations of her text. The open letter continues:

> In your email, 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. We were told to meet the

> offensive parties head on, without suggesting any modes or means to facilitate these discussions to promote understanding.

This beggars belief. Yale students told to talk to each other if they find a peer's costume offensive helplessly declare that they're unable to do so without an authority figure specifying "any modes or means to facilitate these discussions," as if they're Martians unfamiliar with a concept as rudimentary as disagreeing in conversation, even as they publish an open letter that is, itself, a mode of facilitating discussion.

"We are not asking to be coddled," the open letter insists. "The real coddling is telling the privileged majority on campus that they do not have to engage with the brutal pasts that are a part of the costumes they seek to wear." But no one asserted that students should not be

questioned about offensive costumes—only that fellow Yale students, not meddling administrators, should do the questioning, conduct the conversations, and shape the norms for themselves. "We simply ask that our existences not be invalidated on campus," the letter says, catastrophizing.

This notion that one's *existence* can be invalidated by a fellow 18-year-old donning an offensive costume is perhaps the most disempowering notion aired at Yale.

It ought to be disputed rather than indulged for the sake of these students, who need someone to teach them how empowered they are by virtue of their mere enrollment; that no one is capable of invalidating their existence, full stop; that their worth is inherent, not contingent; that everyone is offended by things around them; that they are capable of

tremendous resilience; and that most possess it now despite the disempowering ideology foisted on them by well-intentioned, wrongheaded ideologues encouraging them to imagine that they are not privileged.

Here's one of the ways that white men at Yale are most privileged of all: When a white male student at an elite college says that he feels disempowered, the first impulse of the campus left is to show him the extent of his power and privilege. When any other students say they feel disempowered, the campus left's impulse is to validate their statements. This does a huge disservice to everyone except white male students. It's baffling that so few campus activists seem to realize this drawback of emphasizing victim status even if college administrators sometimes treat it as currency.

That isn't to dismiss all complaints by Yale students. If contested claims that black students were turned away from a party due to their skin color are true, for example, that is outrageous. If any discrete group of students is ever discriminated against, or disproportionately victimized by campus crime, or graded more harshly by professors, then of course students should protest and remedies should be implemented.

Some Yalies are defending their broken activist culture by seizing on more defensible reasons for being upset. "The protests are not really about Halloween costumes or a frat party," Yale senior Aaron Lewis writes. "They're about a mismatch between the Yale we find in admissions brochures and the Yale we experience every day. They're about real experiences with racism on this campus that have gone

unacknowledged for far too long. The university sells itself as a welcoming and inclusive place for people of all backgrounds. Unfortunately, it often isn't."

But regardless of other controversies at Yale, its students owe Nicholas and Erika Christakis an apology. And they owe apologies to other objects of their intolerance, too.

The most recent incident occurred over the weekend. During a conference on freedom of speech, Greg Lukianoff reportedly said, "Looking at the reaction to Erika Christakis's email, you would have thought someone wiped out an entire Indian village." An attendee posted that quote to Facebook. "The online Facebook post led a group of Native American women, other students of color and their supporters to protest the conference in an impromptu gathering outside of LC 102,

where the Buckley event was taking place," the *Yale Daily News* reported.

A bit later the protesters disgraced themselves (emphasis added):

> Around 5:45 p.m., as attendees began to leave the conference, students chanted the phrase "Genocide is not a joke" and held up written signs of the same words. Taking Howard's reminder into account, protesters formed a clear path through which attendants could leave.
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> A large group of students eventually gathered outside of the building on High Street, **where several attendees were spat on**, according to Buckley fellows who were present during the conference. **One Buckley Fellow added that he was spat on and called a racist. Another, who identifies as a minority himself, said he**

> **has been labeled a "traitor" by several.**

These students were offended by one person's words, and were free to offer their own words in turn. That wasn't enough for them, so they *spat on different people* who listened to those words and called one minority student a traitor to his race. In their muddled ideology, the Yale activists had to destroy the safe space to save it.

Readers may be interested in two followup articles that I've just written on themes related to this one: "Campus Activists Weaponize Safe Space" and "Free Speech Is No Diversion," which argues that "defenders of the First Amendment aren't distracting from attention from racism—they're preserving the tools necessary to struggle against it."

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.