

Case Study 4: Safe Spaces and the Debate About Offensive Speech

In October 2015, Yale University's Intercultural Affairs Council sent an email asking students to be thoughtful about the cultural implications of their Halloween costumes. Erika Christakis, associate master of one of Yale's residential colleges, responded to that email, writing in part: "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."

Some Yale students accused Christakis and her husband, residential college master Nicholas Christakis of failing to create a "safe space" for residents. Others [demanded](#) they resign or be removed from their positions. A week later, some students confronted Nicholas Christakis, an incident that was [captured on video](#) and received widespread attention. In May 2016, the Christakises [resigned](#) their positions as masters of the residential college, and returned to full-time academic work.

Reading:

- Erika Christakis, [My Halloween email led to a campus firestorm — and a troubling lesson about self-censorship](#), Washington Post, Oct. 28, 2016
- Zareena Grewal, [Here's what my Yale students get: Free expression and anti-racism aren't mutually exclusive](#), Washington Post, Nov. 12, 2015

Discussion Questions:

- Should the Christakises have resigned? Should the university have removed them if they didn't?
- Erika Christakis' original email suggested that students talk to one another about possibly-offensive Halloween costumes, rather than relying on administrative censorship. What might students have said to each other?
- Hundreds of Yale students [signed a letter](#) responding that "'To ask marginalized students to throw away their enjoyment of a holiday, in order to expend emotional, mental, and physical energy to explain why something is offensive, is — offensive.'" Who bears responsibility for having those conversations? Who is best positioned to do it?
- Christakis points to a "worrying trend" of "self-censorship on campuses." What does she mean?
- Christakis argues that "ideas and feelings aren't interchangeable. Without more explicit commitment to this principle, students are denied an essential condition for intellectual and moral growth: the ability to practice, and sometimes fail at, the art of thinking out loud." Do you agree with that principle? How can a university provide or protect this "essential condition"?
- Grewal argues that "the unquestioned freedom to mock the powerful is qualitatively different than the freedom to, effectively, bully the most vulnerable members of our community." Why?
- Grewal contends that "[i]t's possible — necessary — that we figure out a way as university communities to avoid censorship and at the same time acknowledge that there is such a thing in college as collegiality." How can a university community like Yale or Duke do that?
- What is your reaction to the video of the Christakis incident?
- In the video, [one student shouts](#): "It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It is about creating a home here!" Do you agree?
- Were the students threatening the right to free speech, or simply exercising it? "To affirm the value of freedom of speech, and to keep from silencing others unethically, when may we encourage people to choose their words more carefully, or tell them they ought to have kept silent?" Kate Manne & Jason Stanley, [When Free Speech Becomes a Political Weapon](#), The Chronicle of Higher Education, Nov. 13, 2015