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Democracy Dies in Darkness

GRADE POINT

Don't ask us for trigger warnings or safe spaces, the University of Chicago tells freshmen



By [Susan Svrluga](#)

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University of Chicago students should not expect to get “trigger warnings” before professors talk about sensitive topics, or “safe spaces” where they can gather with others to avoid a speaker whom they find offensive, entering students were told this week.

It is the first university to take such a strong, proactive stand, according to Samantha Harris, director of policy research at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Higher Education, on an issue that has been divisive nationally.

It was not a dramatic change in philosophy for the prestigious university; school president Robert Zimmer’s welcome letter last fall also emphasized freedom of expression, and [a faculty report of 2015 cemented the university’s commitment to that principle](#). But after a year of intense protests at campuses across the country, many involving raw emotions over conflicts about racial tensions and sexual assault, the letter’s direct language set off flares both on campus and far beyond with a debate about free speech, hate speech, student rights and students’ demands.

“Welcome and congratulations on your acceptance to the College at the University of Chicago!” the letter from the dean of students begins. After a warm opening, though, the tone is direct, telling the incoming class of 2020 that a defining characteristic of the school is the commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression — and that they should not expect accommodations many students have demanded at campuses across the country.

“You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion and even disagreement,” John “Jay” Ellison, the dean, wrote in a letter that accompanied a book, [“Academic Freedom and the Modern University: The Experience of the University of Chicago.”](#)

“At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort.

“Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.”

Over the past few years, there has been a sea change nationally, Harris said, in the way that issues of censorship and free speech on campuses have been affecting students and faculty not only in daily conversation but also in the classroom, with a chilling effect on academic freedom. In the past, she saw pushes to censorship coming from the top-down — from university administrators.

Lately, that dynamic has switched in many places, she said, with students pushing for more limits on speech they find offensive.

People debate why this generation of students seems more apt to make such demands, with some believing they are forcing administrators to confront the truth on uncomfortable issues such as campus rape and others saying they have been so over-protected by helicopter parents that they are quick to take offense.

Harris welcomed the letter, and said she hoped other universities would follow and take a strong stand to uphold academic freedom.

Eric Holmberg, the student body president, said he has heard from many students who were upset by it. “The university has been taking some steps to address the toxic climate in terms of racism on campus, sexism on campus,” he said. “... This is a step backward in addressing the toxic campus climate. It seems the university does not want to engage in those ideas.”

“We have an LGBTQ office, they offer safe-space training, they have made an effort to provide safe spaces. Then the dean of students, who’s responsible for student life, is saying the university doesn’t like safe spaces,” he said. “I personally identify as a queer student – when I go to my advisers’ offices, are they still going to be trained in the same way? That’s a real concern for myself and other students.”

There’s also worry about accommodating students who have experienced sexual assault or other trauma, he said. “We don’t shy away from tough conversations about trauma. We don’t pretend it doesn’t exist,” he said “To suggest that warning someone that we’ll be talking about sexual violence detracts from that is completely false.”

Safe spaces and trigger warnings aren’t diminishing academic freedom at the university, he said. “I think the real threat to debate and the free flow of ideas is the suppression by the university of political speech.”

Geoffrey Stone, a professor of law and former provost of the university who led last year’s commission on free expression, said the university wanted to make clear its commitment to the idea after seeing tensions on other campuses. The resulting report was celebrated, he said.

“Literally from its founding, the University of Chicago has marked itself off as an institution that was fiercely committed to intellectual inquiry and debate and deliberation without restraint,” even in the first statements made when the school was created, he said. “And it has been reiterated over the years, and with great pride to that. ... That culture is deeply embedded in the university, I think somewhat uniquely so.”

He said individual faculty members can choose to warn students if they think material may be upsetting, but the university does not support the idea.

Stone said he does not think the letter will deter students from attending the university, because its approach is too clearly a central tenet there for a prospective student or freshman to be unaware of it.

“There’s a great line from a faculty committee report about 15 years ago I’ve always liked,” he said. “At the University of Chicago the only appropriate response to even the most withering question is not resentment but gratitude.”

Reaction to the letter on social media was intense, and polarized. One woman wrote: “I sincerely hope this becomes a trend. We have a nation of people who shut out other people’s opinions if they don’t agree with them. ... People need to understand just because someone doesn’t agree with your stance it doesn’t make them hateful, ignorant or intolerant.”

Another saw the letter this way: “We don’t care if you’ve seen your own friend murdered, been the victim of assault, or experienced any sort of crippling traumatic event in your life. No matter what your dealing with, we promise to do nothing to help you live with it.

Signed,
Some old white guy.”

The report from the faculty committee on freedom expression began with times in history when the university defended controversial speech, and wrote:

Of course, the ideas of different members of the University community will often and quite naturally conflict. But it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive. ...

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the University. But these are narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of expression ...

In a word, the University's fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the University community, not for the University as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose. Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the University community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the University's educational mission. ...

Here is the letter from the dean in full: