

Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces and Microaggressions: Discussing Questions of Freedom of Speech on Campus

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This August, as a new school year was about to begin, the University of Chicago captured media attention with the letter it addressed to incoming first-years.

As *The Times* reported in "University of Chicago Strikes Back Against Campus Political Correctness": The soothing welcome letter to incoming freshmen is a college staple, but this week the University of Chicago took a different approach: It sent new students a blunt statement opposing some hallmarks of campus political correctness, drawing thousands of impassioned responses, for and against, as it caromed around cyberspace.

"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," John Ellison, dean of students, wrote to members of the class of 2020, who will arrive next month.

The letter comes in response to what Greg Lukianoff, president and chief executive of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, calls an "epic" year last year when colleges and universities around the country were forced to publicly and painfully deal with issues of race, sexual assault, gay and transgender rights and free speech — mirrored and magnified in the microcosm of campus life, and amplified by social media.

Before we begin, let's take a look at definitions for the terms safe spaces, trigger warnings, and microaggressions.

- SAFE SPACES -

"Safe spaces" are places where students can gather to avoid a speaker or event that offends them.

- TRIGGER WARNINGS -

In some universities, professors provide "trigger warnings" to students before discussing sensitive topics, emotionally charged issues, or events that may trigger post-traumatic stress.

- MICROAGGRESSIONS -

"Microaggressions" are subtle but offensive comments or actions directed at a minority or other non-dominant group that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype such as "I don't see you as black".

According to a poll recently released by the Gallup Organization, 78 percent of 3,072 students from 32 four-year private and public colleges said they believed their campuses should strive to create an open environment where they would be exposed to a range of speech and views. Twenty-two percent noted that "colleges should prohibit biased or offensive speech in the furtherance of a positive learning environment." But 69 percent favored limitations on speech when it came to language that was deliberately upsetting to some groups.

How can colleges and universities best balance a need to foster intellectual discourse about difficult topics with a need to protect students who may feel marginalized (non-important) for some reason?

Read each statement below. Answer YES or NO or MAYBE. Explain each of your answers with a quality response.

- 1) Colleges should be places where students are exposed to many viewpoints, even if some groups or individuals might find them offensive.
- 2) Classrooms (both high school and college) should be places where all STUDENTS should have the freedom to share their opinions.
- 3) Classrooms (both high school and college) should be places where all TEACHERS should have the freedom to share their opinions.
- 4) Teachers should warn high school students about sensitive content in the books they will read for school.
- 5) Professors should warn college and university students about sensitive content in literature.
- 6) College students should be allowed to opt out of curriculum they disagree with or find offensive.
- 7) Students going to college should expect to be safe from hurtful language and ideas.
- 8) Colleges should be places where uncomfortable ideas can be debated openly.
- 9) A college or university should cancel a speaker a majority of students object to.
- 10) All speech should be free, including speech we find offensive.