

Univ. of Chicago Faculty Strike Back, Defend 'Safe Spaces'

In August, Intellectual Takeout obtained and [published a letter](#) University of Chicago Dean of Students John Jay Ellison sent to students explaining the university's commitment to intellectual freedom and inquiry.

The letter, which told students not to expect safe spaces and trigger warnings, quickly went viral.

This week, several University of Chicago faculty struck back. A letter to the editor [published on the Daily Maroon](#), the campus newspaper, defends the use of trigger warnings and safe spaces. Here is an excerpt:

Dear Students of the Class of 2020:As you have undoubtedly noticed, you and your new institution have been in the media spotlight lately. We want to take this opportunity to voice our own welcome as members of the faculty...

Those of us who have signed this letter have a variety of opinions about requests for trigger warnings and safe spaces. We may also disagree as to whether free speech is ever legitimately interrupted by concrete pressures of the political. That is as it should be. But let there be no mistake: such requests often touch on substantive, ongoing issues of bias, intolerance, and trauma that affect our intellectual exchanges. To start a conversation by declaring that such requests are not worth making is an affront to the basic principles of liberal education and participatory democracy...

The right to speak up and to make demands is at the very heart of academic freedom and freedom of expression generally. We deplore any atmosphere of harassment and threat. For just that reason, we encourage the Class of 2020 to speak up loudly and fearlessly. Sincerely...

The letter was signed by 164 University of Chicago faculty members as of 9:45 a.m.

Intellectual Takeout [has written](#) at length about [speech codes](#) and [the changes](#) taking place on universities campuses. While the issue of free speech on campuses is often framed as one pitting conservatives against progressives, the New York Times points out (correctly) that the debate is primarily taking place “[within the left](#).” (Conservatives don’t have much of a voice on campuses these days.)

What’s striking is that both Ellison’s letter and the one signed by many faculty this week agree on some key points. Both reject harassment and threat of any kind; both claim to embrace academic freedom.

So where exactly is the disagreement? The devil is in the details, as they say, and the degree to which certain phrases uttered on campus are classified as offensive and what types of punitive actions are taken against the transgressors.

[As Jonathan Haidt and others](#) have noted, on many campuses seemingly benign speech—“America is the land of opportunity” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job”—are now classified as microaggressions. ([See this](#) New York magazine article for more.)

Such restrictions on speech have baffled many Americans (those on campuses and those not), a fact which no doubt helped make Ellison's letter go viral.

And then there is the question of enforcement and punishment. Few people, I'd think, have a problem with professors using trigger warnings at their own discretion. But dragging a faculty member or a student before a committee for not using a trigger warning (or uttering something construed as a microaggression) is another story.

University of Chicago faculty seem to have overlooked this point entirely.

"What's driving an entire nation to celebrate Ellison's sentiments with such fervor has apparently been lost on these academics," [notes](#) Jennifer Kabbany of the College Fix.

—

Jon Miltimore is senior editor of Intellectual Takeout. Follow him on Facebook.

[MAIN IMAGE CREDIT: Public Domain]