

The Tattooed Professor

History, Teaching, and Technology with a Custom Paint Job

Trigger Warning: Elitism, Gatekeeping, and Other Academic Crap

Making the rounds on Twitter today was a letter from the University of Chicago (more specifically, the Dean of Students) to the incoming students of the Class of 2020 with the purpose, I guess, of letting them know they were in for a *real* education. More of a full-on broadside than a welcome letter, the dean let the incoming students know in no uncertain terms, that the University is totally committed to academic freedom and “freedom of expression” from its faculty and students.



Office of the
Dean of Students

Dear Class of 2020 Student:

Welcome and congratulations on your acceptance to the College at the University of Chicago. Earning a place in our community of scholars is no small achievement and we are delighted that you selected Chicago to continue your intellectual journey.

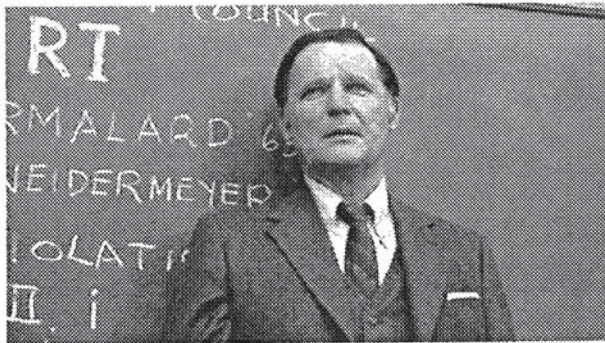
Once here you will discover that one of the University of Chicago's defining characteristics is our commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression. This is captured in the University's faculty report on freedom of expression. Members of our community are encouraged to speak, write, listen, challenge and learn, without fear of censorship. Civility and mutual respect are vital to all of us, and freedom of expression does not mean the freedom to harass or threaten others. You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion, and even disagreement. 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.

Fostering the free exchange of ideas reinforces a related University priority—building a campus that welcomes people of all backgrounds. Diversity of opinion and background is a fundamental strength of our community. The members of our community must have the freedom to espouse and explore a wide range of ideas.

Prepared by Dean John W. Rover, the Martin A. Rverson Distinguished Service

What this means in practice, the letter continues, is that “we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.” And, if you’ve watched students at other campuses, the Dean warns, don’t get any crazy ideas about protesting invited speakers: “we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial.” And, for the love of Milton Friedman, “Our commitment to academic freedom means we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings.’” WE ARE A MIGHTY RACE OF INTELLECTUAL WARRIORS.



Defender of Academic Integrity

As you might imagine, there’s been a wave of support from the usual quarters for the letter and its sentiments; I assume that’s what such a blatant attempt at elitist posturing was aiming for in the first place. On the surface, the points seem hard to argue with.

Academic freedom is the *sine qua non* of higher education. Students ought to be challenged, even made uncomfortable, in order to learn in deep and meaningful ways. And, of course, collegiate education is where students must encounter perspectives different from their own. No one who genuinely believes in higher education is going to dispute any of that. And that’s what this Dean and the anti-trigger-warnings, no-safe-spaces crowd are counting on—that the surface veneer of reasonableness in these admonitions to the Class of 2020 will obscure the rotten pedagogy and logical fallacies that infest this entire screed.

Even the timing of this missive raises questions. Why go full blast against this purported scourge of wimpy, touchy-feely educational malpractice right up front? Is there a safe-spaces petition percolating in the ranks of

the first-years? Are the dean and the university worried that people will lose respect for the almighty maroon if they didn't stake out the tough-guy intellectual turf from the beginning? Did they sit around and ask themselves what Milton Friedman would have done? From the outside, it looks like a lot of smoke without much heat. I suspect that this letter is not intended as an orientation statement, but rather a public rebuke to what its authors see as a threat to their vision of what higher education ought to be. It's not a welcome letter, it's a manifesto looking for an audience.

And as a statement of principle, the letter—as does much of the general argument against trigger warnings and safe spaces—relies on caricature and bogeymen rather than reason and nuance. The document comes from a place, I imagine, where the true defenders of Academic Rigor™ man the parapets against the encroaching legions of namby-pamby liberals who want to coddle students instead of teach them. *Ohhh, you want a safe space so the mean nasty Truths of the world won't hurt your wittle fewings. You want to be "warned" before we discuss "sensitive" subjects. WELL HEY JUNIOR, "WAR AND PEACE" HAS WAR IN IT. If you don't like it, go sit on the quad and sing kum-ba-yah with the other flower children.* That's the specter that arguments like this conjure up: the greatest threat to genuine academic freedom comes from within. Coddled students who are used to getting trophies for everything don't want to engage with stuff they don't like, so they wrap themselves in entitlement and demand trigger warnings to protect their feelz. Or they want safe spaces to hide from the big, bad world. Or they want the university to cancel a lecture because the speaker is from the wrong demographic. And if universities don't make a stand against this foolishness, Western Civilization itself will collapse.

That's a comforting narrative to the academic elite who feel like they're faced with an existential crisis. Rather than seeing themselves as clinging to the last vestiges of the 1950s, they get to paint themselves as staunch advocates of all that is good and worthy. And there's an audience for this

fiction—people still read Alan Bloom. But as critiques of inequality have shown time and again, when you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression. I don't think it's a coincidence that the backlash against so-called "political correctness" in higher education has intensified in direct variation with the diversification of the academy, areas of scholarship, and—most significantly—the student population. Underlying much of the hand-wringing about the state of the academy is a simple desire to have the gatekeepers remain in place. The perception of the threat is entirely out of alignment with the reality on the ground. For every ginned-up hypothetical scenario of spoiled brats having a sit-in to protest too many white guys in the lit course, there are very real cases where trigger warnings or safe spaces aren't absurdities, but pedagogical imperatives. If I'm teaching historical material that describes war crimes like mass rape, shouldn't I disclose to my students what awaits them in these texts? If I have a student suffering from trauma due to a prior sexual assault, isn't a timely caution the empathetic and humane thing for me to do? And what does it cost? A student may choose an alternate text I provide, but this material isn't savagely ripped out of my course to satiate the PC police.

To move from the hypothetical to the real, the Virginia Tech students who protested their university's invitation to Charles Murray to deliver a lecture weren't some sort of intellectual gestapo, they were members of a community calling out other members' violation of the community's ethos. Murray is a racist charlatan who's made a career out of pseudoscientific social darwinist assertions that certain "races" are inherently inferior to others. To bring him to campus is to tell segments of your student community that, according to the ideas the university is endorsing by inviting Murray, they don't belong there. This isn't a violation of academic freedom. It's an upholding of scientific standards and the norms of educated discourse—you know, the type of stuff that colleges and universities are supposed to stand for, right?