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The Opinion Pages

Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces and Free Speech, Too

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I didn't get the University of Chicago welcome letter that made the rounds on the internet earlier this summer. I'm a senior this year, and the message from Jay Ellison, the dean of undergraduate students, was for the incoming class: Don't expect trigger warnings or safe spaces here. The university, he said, was committed to free expression and would not shield students from ideas they disagreed with or found offensive.

The implication was that students who support trigger warnings and safe spaces are narrow-minded, oversensitive and opposed to dialogue. The letter betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of what the terms "trigger warnings" and "safe spaces" mean, and came across as an embarrassing attempt to deflect attention from serious issues on campus.

A trigger warning is pretty simple: It consists of a professor's saying in class, "The reading for this week includes a graphic description of sexual assault," or a note on a syllabus that reads, "This course deals with sensitive material that may be difficult for some students."

A safe space is an area on campus where students — especially but not limited to those who have endured trauma or feel marginalized — can feel comfortable talking

about their experiences. This might be the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs or it could be Hillel House, but in essence, it's a place for support and community.

This spring, I was in a seminar that dealt with gender, sexuality and disability. Some of the course reading touched on disturbing subjects, including sexual violence and child abuse. The instructor told us that we could reach out to her if we had difficulty with the class materials, and that she'd do everything she could to make it easier for us to participate. She included a statement to this effect on the syllabus and repeated it briefly at the beginning of each class. Nobody sought to "retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own," as Dean Ellison put it in the letter, nor did these measures hinder discussion or disagreement, both of which were abundant.

Of course, not every class calls out for trigger warnings — I've never heard of them for an economics course. Likewise, plenty of students will never need to visit a safe space. But for those who do, support systems can be a lifeline in the tumultuous environment of college, and are important precisely because they encourage a free exchange of ideas.

A little heads-up can help students engage with uncomfortable and complex topics, and a little sensitivity to others, at the most basic level, isn't coddling. Civic discourse in this country has become pretty ugly, so maybe it's not surprising that students are trying to create ways to have compassionate, civil dialogue.

The really strange thing about the Ellison letter, though, is that it positioned itself in opposition to resources the University of Chicago has already built: Instructors already choose whether to use trigger warnings in their classes, and there are many safe spaces on campus. Dean Ellison is even listed as a "safe space ally" on the website of one program run by the Office of L.G.B.T.Q. Student Life.

If, as a university spokesman says, no program or policy is set to change, why release this condemnation at all?

The administration wants to appear as an intellectual force beating back destabilizing waves of political correctness that have rocked college campuses. But the focus of student protests hasn't been the lack of trigger warnings and safe spaces.

Instead, many protesters want the university to evaluate how it invests its money, improve access for students with mental illnesses and disabilities, support low-income and first-generation students, and pay its employees fair wages. They have been pushing for more transparency in the school's private police force, which has resisted making most of its policies public in the face of complaints. The university is also under federal investigation over its handling of sexual assault cases.

Yet, the administration has refused to meet with student groups who have asked to discuss these issues, and it has threatened to discipline students who staged a sit-in protest. The university even hired a provost who specializes in corporate crisis management and dealing with "activist pressure." While the university accuses students of silencing opposing voices, it continues to insulate itself against difficult questions.

In this context, it's hard to see the dean's letter as anything other than a public relations maneuver. While students are being depicted as coddled and fragile, the administration is stacking bricks in its institutional wall to avoid engaging with their real concerns.

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It's too bad, because there are certainly legitimate debates to be had over speech in academic settings. The Ellison letter, for example, included a denunciation of