

# Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces, and “Microaggressions”

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Higher Ed Forum October 2016



## College Encourages Lively Exchange Of Idea

*Students, Faculty Invited To Freely Express Single Viewpoint*



NEWS IN BRIEF April 27, 2015



# TRICK OR TREAT

A year after detailed guidance from Yale set off a national debate, many other colleges are still offering detailed advice on how to avoid offensive Halloween costumes.

By [Jake New](#) // October 27, 2016

Earlier this month, the University of Florida also warned students against wearing offensive costumes. The university has twice dealt with students posting photographs of themselves in blackface on social media in recent years.

"Think about your choices of costumes and themes," the university [said in a blog post](#) (<http://gatortimes.ufl.edu/2016/10/10/halloween-costume-choices-4/>). "Some Halloween costumes reinforce stereotypes of particular races, genders, cultures or religions. Regardless of intent, these costumes can perpetuate negative stereotypes, causing harm and offense to groups of people. Also, keep in mind that social media posts can have a long-term impact on your personal and professional reputation."



# TRICK OR TREAT

- ❑ University of Texas-Austin issued a 29-point guide to "costume and theme" selection
- ❑ Tufts [dean of student affairs Mary Pat McMahon](#) criticizes students who don objectionable Halloween garb for making "others in our community feel threatened or unsafe" and for conduct "that is offensive or discriminatory."
  - Students are subject to official inquiries.
- ❑ University of Massachusetts at Amherst instructing students to avoid offensive Halloween costumes.

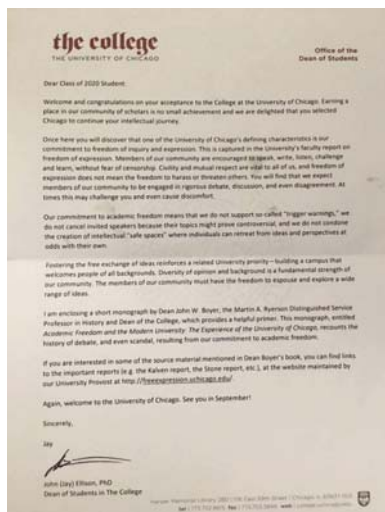


## 2016 Gallup Survey

- Asked if colleges should have policies against slurs and other intentionally offensive language, 69 percent of students said yes, while 27 percent believed they should be able to restrict expression of potentially offensive political views. And 63 percent wanted schools to restrict costumes that stereotype racial or ethnic groups.
- While 76 percent agreed that students should not be able to prevent the news media from covering campus protests, nearly half supported reasons for curtailing that coverage: biased reporting (49 percent), the right to be left alone when protesting (48 percent) and the right to tell their own story on the internet and social media (44 percent). For black students, percentages are higher (66 percent, 61 percent and 54 percent).
- Black students were least sanguine about the right to peaceable assembly: 60 percent saw it as threatened, compared with 29 percent of white students.
- Over all, 54 percent polled said the climate on their campus “prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive.”



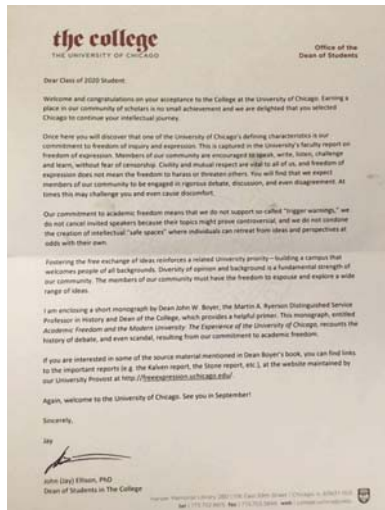
### The University of Chicago



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 you discomfort.



## The University of Chicago



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.



## Trigger Warnings

- Advance notice of potentially traumatizing content
- Not widespread? Only 1% of institutions surveyed in 2015 by National Coalition Against censorship had a policy; only 7.5% of respondents said they had had a request for a policy; 15% had received individual requests for warnings
- Most believe professor should decide – institution should be supportive of that decision



## Trigger Warnings

PROS	CONS
1) _____	1) _____
2) _____	2) _____
3) _____	3) _____

- Thoughtful practice
  - Allows students to prepare for troubling material
  - Ease participation in course work and class discussion
  - Shock for shock's sake is not pedagogically useful
- Infantilizing to flag potentially disturbing work; anti-intellectual
  - Harm academic freedom and intellectual engagement
  - Will circumscribe subject matter taught in classrooms

## Microaggressions

Term coined in 1970 by research psychologist to describe “relatively innocuous” jabs that over time have a harmful cumulative effect.

Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group.<sup>127</sup>

# Microaggressions

U.S.

## Campuses Cautiously Train Freshmen Against Subtle Insults

By STEPHANIE SAUL SEPT. 6, 2016

Microaggressions, Ms. Marlowe said, are comments, snubs or insults that communicate derogatory or negative messages that might not be intended to cause harm but are targeted at people based on their membership in a marginalized group.

Among her other tips: Don't ask an Asian student you don't know for help on your math homework or randomly ask a black student if he plays basketball. Both questions make assumptions based on stereotypes. And don't say "you guys." It could be interpreted as leaving out women, said Ms. Marlowe, who realized it was offensive only when someone confronted her for saying it during a presentation.



"Affirmative action is racist."

To a person of color: "Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can't believe it."

Though UC didn't forbid such statements, labeling them as racial and sex-based "microaggressions" tended to send a powerful message to faculty members and students, especially ones who weren't protected under tenure — a message that you had better not express certain views if you want to stay on the administration's good side. That's a serious blow to academic freedom and to freedom of discourse more generally.

"Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."

[Eugene Volokh](#), opinion, Washington Post, August 31, 2015 re UC List of microaggressions



## Microaggressions

PROS	CONS
①	1)
②	2)
③	3)

- Harm is real; “subtlety” does not mitigate harm
- Harmful in the aggregate; every day transgressions add up
- Words matter; pointing out microaggressions does not inhibit speech; can add to learning and learning environment
- Policing of speech
- Suppressing particular viewpoints
- Comes out of a “victimhood culture”
- Exacerbates political differences,
- An intolerant approach that will increase conflict

## Safe Spaces

I'm an economist, not a sociologist or psychologist, but those experts tell me that students don't fully embrace uncomfortable learning unless they are themselves comfortable. Safe spaces provide that comfort. The irony, it seems, is that the best hope we have of creating an inclusive community is to first create spaces where members of each group feel safe.

Morton Shapiro, Northwestern's President, January 15, 2016

# Safe Spaces

PROS	CONS
① _____	1) _____
② _____	2) _____
③ _____	3) _____

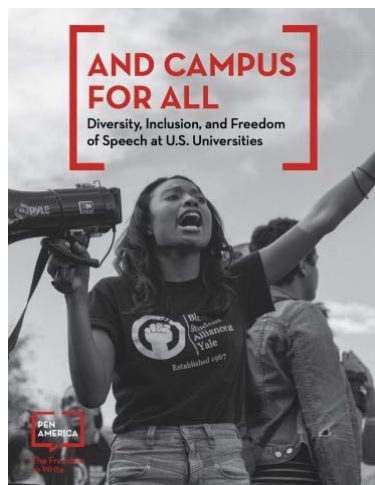
## For

- Students need places of retreat – of physical safety and/or to relax among those with similar interests, experiences, and backgrounds
- Not asking for classrooms to be safe
- Challenged by those who are already protected on campus?

## Against

- “Assured Emotional Safety on Campus is Inimical to Intellectual Openness” (from PEN Report)
- Seen as re-segregation?
- Will impair preparation for the world because too cocooned

# PEN Recommendations



Available at:  
<https://pen.org/on-campus>



## PEN Recommendations

- Common sense recommendations
- Do not recommend not allowing for trigger warnings or safe spaces, or not addressing microaggressions